

DEBATE IN THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OVER WHO SHOULD REPRESENT AMERICAN JEWRY AT THE SEPT. 1 MEETING WITH THE POPE

By Margie Olster

NEW YORK, Aug. 20 (JTA) -- An increasingly bitter debate within the American Jewish community over who will attend the Sept. 1 meeting with Pope John Paul II at his summer home in Castel Gandolfo points to a lack of consensus on who represents American Jewry, according to observers.

Representatives of at least eight Jewish organizations vying for a place on the delegation to the Vatican met here Wednesday night in an unsuccessful attempt to resolve what appears to be the last outstanding issue for the meeting: Who will attend the scheduled one-and-a-half hour dialogue with the Pope?

Wiesel Postpones Meeting With The Pope

In a related development, Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency Thursday he will postpone a visit to Rome to meet with the Pope which he characterized last week as a "long-standing invitation" that he received before the Vatican issued its invitation to other Jewish representatives.

"When the news of my invitation to the Vatican reached members of the Jewish groups that have asked to meet with Pope John Paul II, some of them requested that I postpone my journey to Rome. Since they represent various Jewish organizations and I represent no one, I chose not to create the impression that I interfere with their plans and thus informed the Vatican of my wish that my visit be rescheduled at a later time.

"I hope the meeting between the Jewish groups and Pope John Paul II will bring much needed results," Wiesel said.

At the same time, some Jewish officials welcomed the publication Wednesday of a letter from the Pope to an American Catholic leader on the Holocaust which was widely viewed as a gesture to mollify Jewish anger over his audience with Austrian President and accused Nazi war criminal Kurt Waldheim in June.

Seeking A Place In The Delegation

The Vatican issued an invitation about two weeks ago formally to the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC) which comprises five Jewish organizations: the Synagogue Council of America (SCA); World Jewish Congress (WJC); B'nai B'rith International; American Jewish Committee (AJC); and Israel Interfaith Association (IIA). The Pope has requested no more than five representatives attend the meeting.

Initially, IJCIC intended to compose a delegation from its member organizations. But shortly after news of the meeting became public, a number of other organizations requested that they be included in the delegation.

The Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), American Jewish Congress, and the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith all sent representatives to the meeting Wednesday night in

hopes of carving out a place for themselves on the delegation.

Some of the representatives at the meeting Wednesday night suggested a larger delegation be sent to meet with high-ranking Vatican officials during the two-day visit while only five or six would meet with the Pope.

Lay leaders have complained that the delegation would not be representative of American Jews because only rabbis would be included. The Zionist Organization of America (ZOA) has castigated IJCIC for failing to include any Zionist representatives in the delegation. The Labor Zionist Alliance (LZA) has called on the American Jewish community to "boycott any meeting with Pope John Paul II" in light of his granting an audience to Waldheim.

Milton Shapiro, ZOA president, criticized IJCIC for neglecting the input of major American Jewish organizations and the entire Zionist movement in forming the agenda for the meeting. A more appropriate forum for establishing an agenda would have been one of the major umbrella organizations like the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, Shapiro said.

The issue of Jewish representation is further complicated by the injection of political issues into a dialogue traditionally centered on theological and interfaith concerns.

A Four-Point Agenda

Although the groups have not and probably will not work out a solution which is satisfactory to all, the four-point agenda for the meeting has widespread support. The delegation will raise the concern over rising anti-Semitism in Europe and especially in Austria in light of the Waldheim controversy. The Holocaust and the Vatican's refusal to establish diplomatic relations with Israel will also be presented as issues of concern.

The fourth item on the agenda, contradictory Vatican statements on Jews and Judaism, goes to the heart of the historical antagonism between the two faiths. According to one participant in the formation of the agenda, the Pope has alternately made positive statements on Jews and Judaism when speaking to an interfaith audience but has made some distressing references in meetings with Catholic audiences.

Last year during an Easter Mass in Rome the Pope quoted from the Gospels, thereby reviving a theology denounced two decades ago within Catholicism that the Jews were to blame for the death of Jesus.

On the other end of the spectrum have been statements not unlike the Pope's letter released Wednesday promoting mutual respect and friendship between the two faiths.

Significance Of Pope's Letter

The Pope's letter to Archbishop John May of St. Louis released Wednesday took on increased significance in light of the tension between the two religions caused by the Waldheim meeting. The Pope's letter thanked Archbishop May for preparing a book entitled "On Jews and Judaism 1979-1985," which chronicled the Pope's statements on the topic.

The cover letter which accompanied the Pope's letter noted that it was "most appropriate following recent events involving the visit of the President of the Federal Republic of Austria, Dr. Kurt Waldheim, to the Holy Father."

The Pope recounted in his letter his efforts to "develop and deepen our relationships with the Jews, 'our elder brothers in the faith of Abraham.'" But he devotes the greater part of the letter to a discussion of the Holocaust and its meaning.

"With our hearts filled with this unyielding hope, we Christians approach with immense respect the terrifying experience of the extermination, the Shoah, suffered by Jews during the Second World War, and we seek to grasp its most authentic, specific and universal meaning."

"As I said recently in Warsaw, it is precisely by reason of this terrible experience that the Nation of Israel, her sufferings and her Holocaust are today before the eyes of the Church, of all peoples and of all nations as a warning, a witness and a silent cry."

Before the vivid memory of the extermination, as recounted to us by the survivors and by all Jews now living, and as it is continually offered for our meditation within the narration of the Pesah Haggadah -- as Jewish families are accustomed to do today -- it is not permissible for anyone to pass by with indifference. Reflection upon the Shoah shows us what terrible consequences the lack of faith in God and a contempt for man created in His image can lead."

The Pope concluded with his wishes for furthering the "spirit of peace and universal fraternal solidarity" with American Catholics and Jews in his upcoming visit.

A meeting with Jewish officials has been scheduled for Sept. 11 in Miami. Many of the organizations originally participating in the meeting considered boycotting it after the Pope met Waldheim. The groups have called on the Pope to make some statement defining his views on the Holocaust as a prerequisite to their participation in the Miami meeting.

IRANIAN PARLIAMENT SPEAKER SUGGESTS SWAP OF ISRAELI-HELD LEBANESE SHIITES FOR U.S. HOSTAGES

By Susan Blinbaum

NEW YORK, Aug. 20 (JTA) -- In a rare interview on American television, the Speaker of the Iranian Parliament, Hojatolislam Hashemi Rafsanjani, has proposed that the United States pressure Israel to swap Lebanese Shiites being held in Israeli prisons for American hostages. The interview was telecast on the "Today" show Thursday.

Rafsanjani told NBC foreign editor Henry Champ that although "Iran does not interfere in other countries," he agreed that Iran has influence among Lebanese Shiites because they do, in fact, turn to Iranian religious leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini "for guidance."

But, said Rafsanjani, responding to Champ's question on the possibility of Iran interceding with the Lebanese Shiites for the American hostages' release, "Why should we do it when you have hostile attitudes toward us and such a naval build-up in the Persian Gulf?" Rafsanjani then suggested that the U.S. put pressure on Israel to

release Lebanese prisoners being held in Israel. "You have done this before. Why don't you repeat that?"

When Champ asked him, "Are you suggesting a trade?" Rafsanjani succinctly replied, "Yes, we do."

Rafsanjani said, "I don't think I have absolute power to do that (release hostages). I only promise I will do my best."

A commentator on NBC News following the interview said that the Israeli government had publicly responded to the suggestion by saying it would not negotiate with Iran over release of Lebanese prisoners in Israeli prisons. But CBS News later claimed that Israeli spokespersons indicated that Iran had not made such a direct offer to Israel for any consideration of it to be made.

Barukh Binah, press spokesperson at the Israel Consulate in New York, said, "We don't take this very seriously. He (Rafsanjani) can say whatever he likes on television. Our stand concerning terrorism is known."

Rafsanjani also said that "The Islamic way of thinking should be propagated everywhere. This is what we believe in, and this is what we work for."

Rafsanjani said he is not optimistic about an early end to the Gulf War between Iran and Iraq. However, he also suggested that if the U.S. came out with a statement that Iraq had started the war, "Iran would end the war. I think we could expect that."

REITERATING BOYCOTT DENIAL, SAFeway SAYS IT BUYS FROM ISRAEL

NEW YORK, Aug. 20 (JTA) -- Safeway Stores, Inc., reiterating its claim of innocence of 449 alleged violations of the U.S. law against boycotting Israel, said Wednesday that it has consistently purchased Israeli products.

In addition, the Safeway statement said that company officers including chairman and chief executive Peter Magowan "have demonstrated strong personal commitment to the State of Israel and have received many awards from American Jewish organizations."

The Northern California Jewish Bulletin reported August 7 that Magowan "has a personal track record of support for the Jewish State," including the hosting of luncheons for visiting Israeli dignitaries and visiting Israel twice with groups of businesspeople.

In the statement, Magowan noted that Safeway has "bought and sold millions of dollars worth of Israeli products." Safeway general counsel Bernat Rosner added that the company "has a long history of resisting all demands to participate in boycotts wherever they take place and regardless of the intensity of pressure."

According to Magowan, the boycott charges by the U.S. Commerce Department's Office of Antiboycott Compliance involve 10 supermarkets in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait that Safeway has never owned, but with which Safeway has had service agreements.

If found guilty by a Commerce Department administrative law judge, Safeway could be fined more than \$4 million, or \$10,000 per violation. Rosner said "potential fines are ludicrous, and we intend to defend ourselves vigorously."

BEHIND THE HEADLINES GOING AFTER WAR CRIMINALS

By Margie Olster

NEW YORK, Aug. 20 (JTA) -- An effort by a group of 50 British Parliamentarians to put the issue of war criminals living in the United Kingdom on the government's agenda has gained substantial ground in recent months.

The All Party Parliamentary War Crimes Group (APWCCG) crystallized last November shortly after the Simon Wiesenthal Center of Los Angeles furnished the British government with a list of 17 alleged Nazi war criminals thought to be living in the UK.

Britain is the only one of the four English-speaking World War II Allied nations which has not set up some form of commission of inquiry into fugitive war criminals who found refuge within its borders. Canada, the U.S., and Australia have all within the past decade established some kind of inquiry. But Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and her government have not responded to the demands for a similar effort.

Parliamentarians Decide To Act

When the government failed to respond to the list of 17, a group of Parliamentarians decided to form the voluntary, non-partisan and independent organization to lobby the government for prosecution and deportation of war criminals and related war crimes issues.

Labor MPs Merlyn Reese, and Greville Jenner, one of the strongest Jewish activists in Parliament, head the war crimes group.

Philip Rubenstein, the group's secretary and only staff member who is not a member of Parliament, recently visited New York on a fact-finding visit to the U.S. and Canada. Rubenstein told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency that one of the group's most substantial achievements to date was persuading the government to change its position regarding the opening of the United Nations War Crimes Commission (UNWCC) archive to wider access.

The Israel UN Mission requested that UN Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar make the files -- now available only to UN member governments -- publicly accessible. Perez de Cuellar in turn called on the 17 governments that composed the original War Crimes Commission, including Britain, to vote on Israel's request. Although originally only one government supported Israel's petition, most have since changed their position.

The British government now supports less restricted access, which would include bona fide researchers as well as UN member-governments, Rubenstein said. "We are raising the issue constantly," he said.

For about two months, the group concentrated on eliciting some kind of statement from the British government on the war criminals list. The feeling was that the government should take responsibility for investigating and bringing action against those listed.

The group has sought the establishment of a government agency parallel to the U.S. Justice Department's Office of Special Investigations, which investigates and prosecutes suspected war criminals living in the U.S.

After months of little movement, a breakthrough came in January 1987 when Scottish Television aired a half-hour program on a man named Antanas Gecas who lived at the time in

Edinburgh, Scotland. Gecas, inter alia, admitted on camera that he had protected Nazis who were killing Jews when he was the commander of a wartime Lithuanian police battalion.

Gecas was part of a "mobile killing unit," according to Eli Rosenbaum, a Washington attorney and former prosecutor for the Office of Special Investigations. Between 1942 and 1943, Gecas' unit "went on a rampage through Byelorussia, from town to town, shtetl to shtetl, wiping out every Jewish man, woman and child they could lay their hands on," Rosenbaum said. Thousands were murdered in this onslaught, he said.

Scottish-Television interviewed comrades of Gecas while gathering evidence for the documentary in the Soviet Union. The witnesses said Gecas had personally ordered hangings and was involved in mass murders. The documentary, titled "Britain: A Nazi Safehouse," raised interest in the war crimes issues despite receiving little advance publicity and being aired at 11:30 p.m., when relatively few people watch. The producers had difficulty finding a network that would air the show.

Despite the difficulties, the program had some impact, Rubenstein said. Finally, in late February, the APWCCG met with Home Office Secretary Douglas Hurd. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher charged the Home Office, which handles immigration and naturalization matters, with the responsibility for the war criminals list.

Possibilities For Legal Action

Hurd outlined a pessimistic list of possibilities for legal action against the war criminals, Rubenstein said. Hurd also informed the group that the Home Office had found that six of the people on the Wiesenthal list were alive and residing in the UK.

"There was an explosion in the press-front-page articles -- radio and TV," Rubenstein said. A week later in March, Rabbis Marvin Hier and Abraham Cooper of the Wiesenthal Center met with Hurd in London.

"The Home Office had been forced to change their tune" as a result of the heavy press coverage, Rubenstein said. The government indicated that the Gecas case had produced strong enough evidence to merit action.

Hurd told Cooper and Hier that the only thing they would rule out was extradition or deportation to the Soviet Union. The British would, however, consider extradition to Israel and West Germany. The Home Office favored denaturalization and deportation for war criminals, Rubenstein said.

Thatcher preferred to fall back on extradition rather than criminal prosecution. But this passive approach to the demands for action against war criminals will have little practical effect, Rosenbaum said. The United States has received only three extradition requests ever from countries with whom it has a treaty (excluding requests from the Soviet Union, which has no extradition treaty with the U.S. or Britain).

The Home Office pledged to gather immigration records and documentary evidence about the 17 people listed by the Wiesenthal Center. Any possible action would depend on the weight of the evidence presented. To date, the British government has taken no action against any suspected Nazi war criminals living in the UK. The British elections put the group's activities on hold temporarily but in July they returned to their work for a time until the Parliament recessed for

summer. In the meantime, Scottish Television aired on July 22 a follow-up documentary on the Gecas case. This time, the station held a press conference. The program ran an hour, received advance publicity and had a much greater impact on the public, Rubenstein said.

The Wiesenthal Center submitted evidence to the British government against Gecas (who was on its list of 17 suspected war criminals in the UK) which Scottish Television obtained in the Soviet Union and evidence on two others on the list. To date, the Home office has determined that nine of the 17 are alive in the UK.

Scottish Television provided the APPWCG with a list of 34 additional suspected Nazi war criminals living in the UK which they obtained from the Soviet Embassy in London. The Home Office determined that at least seven of the 34 are alive in the UK. The Home Office, in a few short months, has determined that 16 suspected Nazi war criminals are living in the UK, most of them from Baltic states and the Ukraine.

The APPWCG has received an enormous amount of mail, according to Rubenstein, the great majority of it strongly in favor of their activities.

"The people are outraged that Nazis came into Britain," Rubenstein said. "British are very proud that Britain was one of the few countries that withstood the Nazi occupation of Europe."

The group has also received what Rubenstein called "standard hate mail" from neo-Nazis who claim that "(Menachem) Begin and (Ariel) Sharon are the real war criminals."

England's Jewish community of about 400,000 usually maintains a low profile, Rubenstein said. But the attention focussed on war crimes issues in recent months has received national attention that makes some in the community a bit nervous, he said.

EL AL IN FINANCIAL TURNAROUND By Haviva Krasner

NEW YORK, Aug. 20 (JTA) -- El Al, Israel's national airline, has posted its first annual profit in nearly a decade. Rafi Harlev, president of the airline, said that "As a result of managing operations carefully, El Al Israel Airlines has substantially reduced its debt burden and is showing a net profit of \$15.2 million on revenues of approximately \$567 million for the fiscal year that ended March 31, 1987. For the same period last year, El Al reported a loss of \$6.7 million on revenues of \$491 million."

The announcement of El Al's financial turnaround led to speculation on Wall Street that the Israel government-owned airline will soon go public and sell its stock on the New York Stock Exchange. The speculation was fired by the fact that a number of other government-owned airlines, such as British Airways and Japan Airlines, have recently gone public or announced plans to do so. In addition, the speculation was also prompted by the practice of airlines trying to improve their profitability and announcing management operations improvements before a public sale.

"We can reasonably project that in the next two or three years it would make a lot of sense for the Israeli government, if El Al continues to show a profit, to sell its stocks," said Aviva Lavi, director of public relations and advertising for El Al. "But it is the government's final decision."

David Schein, general manager and vice president of El Al in North and Central America, said it is the policy of the Israeli government to sell its companies, and since El Al is now showing a profit there are many financial organizations that have expressed interest in purchasing the company. El Al is among 600 government-owned companies that could be sold, Schein said.

Factors In Improvement

The airline, in a statement by Harlev released in Tel Aviv, cited many factors that have contributed to its improvement. According to Harlev, El Al managed operations very carefully during the past year, resulting in a whole line of scheduling improvements, which include expanded non-stop service, aggressive cost-cutting measures and the streamlining of operations, Harlev said.

The airline also reported a 77 percent North Atlantic route load factor (percentage of the plane filled) compared to the International Airline Transport Association's industry average of 63 percent. Improvements also included an 84 percent on-time performance record for the year, which, Lavi said, is higher than most, although she could not compare it to an industry average since until now airlines have not been required to register their percentages.

Over the year, El Al's permanent staff was reduced from 3,568 to 3,538. "The employees at El Al are really committed," Lavi noted. "They had to cope with less personnel, and it was difficult, but they really care. El Al is a Jewish airline and they are proud of it."

Another accomplishment was that in the past year El Al carried over 1.5 million passengers. The company has started offering package tour deals to expand its market penetration. These include the "Milk and Honey" tours to Israel; special programs to Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Israel; and extensions to London, Cairo and Eilat. El Al recently inaugurated services to Israel from Madrid, Toronto and Boston.

DEMJANJUK TRIAL RECESSED UNTIL SEPT. 7

JERUSALEM, Aug. 20 (JTA) -- The trial of John Demjanjuk has recessed until Sept. 7 following a request by the defense at the end of Wednesday's session.

Court President Dov Levin had announced some weeks ago that the court would recess from Aug. 25 to Sept. 7, because of prior commitments on the part of the bench. However, he had refused to allow any extra time, in addition to that week, for the defense to prepare its case.

Defense Counsels John Gill and Yoram Sheftel had claimed that Mark O'Connor, the former head of the defense team who was dismissed by the Demjanjuk family, had left them unprepared.

On Wednesday, after the credibility of the two expert witnesses for the defense was apparently shaken by prosecutor Michael Shaked, the defense appealed again for more preparation time, and on this occasion the request was granted.

• • •

NEW YORK, Aug. 20 (JTA) -- The Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith has called on Secretary of State George Shultz to close the Palestine Information Office in Washington, saying "continued operation of that office is contrary to our national interest."