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ARAFAT, WARMLY WELCOMED IN ITALY, SPEAKS TO POPE ABOUT IMMIGRATION

By Ruth E. Gruber

ROME, April 8 (JTA) -- Yasir Arafat took his campaign against Soviet Jewish aliyah to the Vatican on Friday, telling Pope John Paul II that the massive wave of immigration would cause "dangerous demographic changes" in Jerusalem that would "distort the historical character and civilization of the city."

A Vatican spokesman refused to confirm whether the subject of Soviet Jewish immigration came up during the pontiff's 20-minute audience with the Palestine Liberation Organization leader, his third since 1982.

The audience was the highlight of Arafat's two-day visit to Italy, which ended Friday evening with an address to some 5,000 people at an open-air rally in the city of Perugia.

Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro Valls issued a statement Friday saying the pope agreed to receive Arafat "believing it is a fundamental part of his ministry to encourage every positive attitude in the search for peace and, in particular, to reinforce the will for dialogue as the only valid means to find adequate solutions to conflicts."

The statement recalled that in the course of his pontificate, the pope had "many times affirmed the necessity to exclude in the most absolute way the recourse to arms and especially the violence exercised by terrorist means and revenge."

The papal statement was a virtual replay of those issued by the Vatican after Arafat's meetings with the pope on Sept. 15, 1982, and Dec. 23, 1988.

AJCommittee Leaders Disappointed

The only element not found in the earlier statements was the injunction that each side in the conflict respect the "fears of the other" in addition to their rights, observers pointed out.

The statement referred to the "two peoples who live in the Holy Land, the Israelis and the Palestinians."

It asserted the pope's "profound conviction" that "only a sincere will for mutual understanding" could open the way to negotiation and "the end of suffering" that "allows everyone to live in peace, liberty, dignity and tranquility in his own country."

In New York, the American Jewish Committee, whose leaders met with the pope on March 16, issued a statement Friday expressing "regret that the pope did not publicly call on Mr. Arafat specifically to condemn and renounce the murder of Palestinians by other Palestinians."

The reference was to Palestinians slain by intifada activists on suspicion of collaborating with the Israeli authorities.

"Arafat has steadfastly refused to speak out against those horrors. We are sorry that an important opportunity to focus attention on this situation was missed," the statement said.

Arafat told a news conference following his audience that he had "warmly thanked the pope for the position taken by the Vatican and the pope himself on the sovereignty of the Palestinian

people and its right to national independence in its own land."

Arafat's speech in Perugia, a university city about 100 miles north of Rome with a large foreign student population, including many Arabs, was one of the PLO chief's few public addresses outside the Arab world.

Meets With Italian Leaders

He devoted it to accusing Israel of state terrorism against Palestinians involved in the intifada, including the alleged use of poison gas against demonstrators. He compared Israel's treatment of the Palestinians to Nazi treatment of the Jews in the Holocaust.

Arafat had a receptive audience. The crowd of 5,000 chanted "Intifada!" and raised their hands in the "Victory" sign.

Many prominent left-wing politicians attended the rally, which was supported unofficially by the neo-fascist Italian Social Movement.

"Thank you, Italy," Arafat declared. "I thank the government, which made this visit possible."

Arafat came to Italy at the invitation of the government after meeting last week in Paris with former U.S. President Jimmy Carter and the president of France, Francois Mitterrand.

He was received in Rome by President Francesco Cossiga, Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti and Foreign Minister Gianni de Michelis.

The Israeli Embassy in Rome protested to the Foreign Ministry in advance of Arafat's arrival last week, not only that he was an official guest but that the visit is "on the same level as a state visit."

"Presenting Arafat as a man of peace, forgetting what he has done for the cause of terrorism not only doesn't help the cause of peace, but perverts the political debate and obtains the opposite results," the Israeli statement said.

Another protest came from Seymour Reich, president of B'nai B'rith International, who expressed "deep concern" about the prime minister's meeting with Arafat.

Andreotti responded in a letter to Reich dated April 5 that "the approach Italy has constantly followed in its contacts with the PLO is based on a firm desire to help the parties in coming together with the goal of negotiations, while rejecting any recourse to violence."

U.S.-SOVIET TALKS MAKE NO HEADWAY ON DIRECT FLIGHTS, MIDEAST PEACE

By David Friedman

WASHINGTON, April 8 (JTA) -- Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze ended three days of talks with Secretary of State James Baker on Friday by pulling back the hand he appeared to have offered Israel.

On the issues of the Middle East peace process, direct flights from Moscow to Tel Aviv and the restoration of diplomatic relations with Israel, Shevardnadze left Washington with the Soviet position unchanged.

The three issues were discussed by Baker and Shevardnadze, although their talks focused on arms control and the situation in Lithuania, as it

did when Shevardnadze met with President Bush for two hours Friday at the White House.

During the meetings, it was announced that Bush would host Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev for their second summit May 30 to June 3. Baker and Shevardnadze will meet once again before the summit, this time in Moscow from May 16 to 19.

On the Middle East, Shevardnadze at first seemed to be supporting Baker's efforts to bring about a dialogue between Israel and Palestinians.

An Israeli-Palestinian dialogue "is in process, and I believe it is useful," he said at a news conference at the State Department late Friday afternoon. He did not mention the Palestine Liberation Organization.

Baker Suggests Seeking Assurances

But then Shevardnadze said that the peace process could only be advanced within the framework of an international conference under the auspices of the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council: the United States, Soviet Union, France, Britain and the People's Republic of China. Israel opposes such a conference.

Shevardnadze also said that the U.N. secretary-general should appoint "a special representative for the Middle East."

At a separate news conference after Shevardnadze spoke, Baker rejected the proposal.

"I do not think the time is appropriate for that," the secretary of state said. "I do not think that exercise would be productive."

Baker said he told Shevardnadze that "we are at a somewhat sensitive time with respect to the possibility of a dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians. I don't think that right now we ought to divert attention or efforts from the possibility of getting that dialogue started."

But it was on the issue of direct flights that the Soviets seemed to be backing off from what appeared to be positive movement during the three days of talks.

Baker revealed Friday that it was he who had suggested that the Soviets allow direct flights to Israel in exchange for assurances from Israel that Soviet Jews would not settle in the West Bank or Gaza Strip.

"We haven't asked Israel for any assurances with respect to Soviet immigration, because we support Soviet immigration unqualifiedly and unconditionally," the secretary said.

But when the Soviets were pressed on direct flights, Baker said Shevardnadze "said they could not lighten up on Soviet emigration in the face of the possibility that some of the immigrants would go to the occupied territory."

Takes Stand On East Jerusalem

Baker said the Soviets were asked "if they had considered approaching Israel with respect to the possibility of assurances. They said they hadn't, but they thought it was an idea that they would like to consider," he reported.

After his meeting with Bush, Shevardnadze had told reporters, gathered under pouring rain in the White house driveway, that the "one problem" to allowing direct flights is "the settlement of the Jews in the occupied territories." He added that Moscow considers East Jerusalem part of those territories.

But at his news conference later, he said that Soviets not only want those assurances, but evidence by Israel of "good faith compliance with decisions of the United Nations."

Even if Shevardnadze had only sought assurances on the settlement of immigrants in the territories, it is doubtful that any Israeli government could accept such a request.

The proposal is "ridiculous," said Malcolm Hoenlein, executive director of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. He said the Kremlin was "creating conditions which Israel cannot possibly accept."

At a White House ceremony marking Passover last Wednesday, Bush pledged "to continue to do everything necessary to make it possible for Soviet Jews to go to Israel."

He added that this included "continuing to press for direct and indirect flights."

At his news conference Friday, Baker indicated that some progress was made on the general issue of Jewish emigration.

He said the United States was making "headway on our objective of resolving the refusenik cases, facilitating the exit of Soviet Jews and building a new agenda in the area, an agenda that emphasizes the rule of law." He gave no details.

Jackson-Vanik Discussed

Baker said there also was discussion on reaching a trade agreement to be signed at the Bush-Gorbachev summit. "We discussed how this would necessitate action on immigration legislation," Baker said.

But it is difficult to see how this could be accomplished since the summit is to be held, at Gorbachev's request, several weeks earlier than expected.

U.S.-Soviet trade talks have been going on since Bush and Gorbachev met in Malta last December. But a trade agreement could not go into effect unless the United States waives sanctions contained in the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, which links most-favored-nation trade benefits for the Soviet Union with increasing emigration.

At the Malta summit, the Bush administration made clear that the president would consider a one-year waiver of Jackson-Vanik sanctions only if the Soviets adopted much-stalled legislation reforming their emigration policy, followed by an unspecified period in which the law could be seen working.

The latest prediction for the Soviets to adopt the legislation is sometime this summer.

The possibility of a restoration of diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and Israel, which Moscow severed in 1967, was raised last Thursday. But the following day, Shevardnadze said that this was an issue that depended on a resolution of the Arab-Israel conflict.

He pointed out that Israel and the Soviet Union already had consular relations. When asked if this would be upgraded to full diplomatic relations, he replied, "We'll see."

1,000 MORE PLACES AT THE SEDER TABLE

By Cathrine Gerson

JERUSALEM, April 8 (JTA) -- Thousands of Soviet immigrants, who have been arriving in even greater numbers in recent days, will not have to wait until "next year in Jerusalem" to celebrate the seder here.

Nearly 1,000 immigrants from the Soviet Union have arrived here during the last two days and more are expected to land by the time Passover begins Monday night, officials announced Sunday.

MOMENTUM FOR LABOR COALITION GROWS AS LIKUD DEFECTORS SIDE WITH PERES

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM, April 8 (JTA) -- The Labor Party's chances of forming a new government soared Sunday as it began negotiations with five Likud defectors who apparently have spurned their old party's efforts to win them back.

Talks were being held under a thick veil of secrecy at the Tel Aviv Dan Hotel and at other sites.

There was jubilation in the Labor camp, gloom at Likud headquarters.

If all goes well -- and the Laborites appear optimistic -- Shimon Peres will introduce a new coalition government to the Labor Party's Central Committee on Tuesday night and present it to the Knesset for a vote of confidence on Wednesday.

The legislative body has been called out of Passover recess solely for that purpose on April 11, the date Peres' three-week deadline to form a government expires.

Until late last week, he was unable to break the 60-60 Knesset deadlock between Labor and Likud and their respective supporters.

Then suddenly the dam broke. Labor concluded coalition agreements Sunday with the dovish parties of the left and center: Mapam, Shinui and the Citizens Rights Movement.

At the same time, signals began to emanate from the Orthodox Shas party that its Council of Torah Sages might reverse itself and order its Knesset faction to join the Labor-led coalition once it gets a Knesset vote of confidence.

Labor concluded a coalition pact last week with another Orthodox party, Agudat Yisrael.

Sharir Announces Support

But if Labor's apparent success materializes, it will have to be credited to the five members of Likud's Liberal Party wing who broke away last month to form a separate Knesset faction called the Party to Preserve Liberal-Zionist Values.

The defectors were led by Yitzhak Moda'i, the former minister of economics and planning, a hard-line critic of Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir's peace diplomacy.

Rumors abounded last week that Moda'i and Avraham Sharir, a former minister of tourism, had decided to cast their lot with Labor. But when neither would make a public statement, they were considered to have had second thoughts.

Both came under intense pressure and blandishments from Likud. Sharir had an appointment with Shamir on Friday.

But he announced formally Saturday night that he was swinging to Labor.

Sharir, who became an embarrassment for the Likud after a series of well-publicized junkets, has a deep personal grudge against Shamir for excluding him from the Likud government set up after the 1988 elections.

By Sunday night, his fellow defectors were engaged in talks with Labor. Two of them, Pinhas Goldstein and Pessah Grupper, showed up at the Dan Hotel.

Moda'i thought better of it when he arrived and saw the army of reporters and cameramen waiting outside. He was seen driving away, apparently to meet with Labor negotiators elsewhere.

If Moda'i, with or without his colleagues, joins the coalition, he will probably be named finance minister with "special powers" as well in the field of immigrant absorption.

RALLY FOR ELECTORAL REFORM DRAWS THOUSANDS OF ISRAELIS

By Hugh Orgel

TEL AVIV, April 8 (JTA) -- Israelis made clear their disgust with current politics and disdain for the politicians at a giant rally for electoral reform here Saturday night.

Between 100,000 and a quarter-million people filled Malchei Yisrael Square outside City Hall and overflowed into side streets, to hear speaker after speaker condemn the way the Knesset is chosen and to propose changes.

They carried banners addressed to Knesset leaders and members reading, "We're Fed Up With You" and "You're All Corrupt."

According to one police official, it was the largest public gathering in Israel's history, surpassing the Peace Now rally of 1982 against the Lebanon war.

That was supposed to have brought out 400,000, a figure admitted later to have been exaggerated. The police therefore no longer issue official crowd estimates.

For all their fervor, the massed voters kept remarkably good order, as speakers railed against the horse-trading and bribery that has occurred during the last three weeks, as Labor has tried to put together a new government and Likud has determined to block it.

The speakers included three high-ranking Israel Defense Force reserve officers -- whose two-week hunger strike outside the Knesset building in Jerusalem rallied thousands to the cause of reform -- as well as the mayors of major cities, of both Labor and Likud.

But while all agreed that reforms are necessary and inevitable, different ways were suggested to effect change.

Col. Avi Kadish, one of the three Jerusalem hunger strikers, called for the replacement of proportional representation by a constituency system.

Instead of casting ballots for a party with a prescribed list of candidates, the public would vote for candidates individually, who would then be accountable to them.

The prime minister would also be elected by direct ballot. Under the existing system, the candidate who heads the list of the party that garners the most votes automatically becomes prime minister.

The reformers are also calling for a written constitution.

YESHIVA STUDENT STABBED IN OLD CITY

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM, April 8 (JTA) -- Police are still searching for the assailant who stabbed a yeshiva student Friday in the Moslem Quarter of the Old City.

At least 150 Arab suspects were arrested for questioning, but all have been released.

The victim, Daniel Robins, 31, was recovering from a superficial back wound at the Hadasah Medical Center in Ein Kerem.

He was attacked while walking with his baby son Yishai from the Yeshiva Atara Leyoshna to a nearby grocery store.

Robins, who was armed, fired his pistol into the air to attract help and contacted the police headquarters on his walkie-talkie radio. He was swiftly evacuated by ambulance as police closed the Old City gates and began arresting Arabs.

DOLE HEADING DELEGATION OF SENATORS VISITING ISRAEL, THREE ARAB NATIONS

By Howard Rosenberg

WASHINGTON, April 8 (JTA) -- Senate Minority Leader Robert Dole (R-Kan.), who earlier this year proposed cutting U.S. aid to Israel, left Saturday for a trip to the Middle East that includes stops in Israel and three Arab countries.

The delegation was to arrive in Syria on Sunday, Egypt on Monday and Jordan on Wednesday. The group will reach Israel on Thursday, where it will stay through April 15.

The delegation will meet with heads of state or government of all of those countries, as well as with Israeli Labor Party leader Shimon Peres and "moderate" Palestinian leaders in Israel and the territories.

Dole earlier this year proposed a 5 percent cut in U.S. aid to Israel and other top foreign aid recipients in order to use the money to help emerging democracies in Eastern Europe and Central America.

But if Israel bears any malice toward the Republican leader, it was not evident in comments made by Ruth Yaron, the spokeswoman at the Israeli Embassy here.

"We are happy that both he and his wife agreed to go," said Yaron. Dole's wife, Elizabeth, is secretary of labor.

Yaron said she expected Dole's dialogue with Israeli leaders to be "frank and candid."

"There is nothing better than to go to Israel and to make impressions first-hand," she said.

Accompanying Dole are Sens. Charles Grassley (R-Iowa), Howard Metzenbaum (D-Ohio), James McClure (R-Idaho), Frank Murkowski (R-Alaska) and Alan Simpson (R-Wyo.).

Since Passover occurs while Metzenbaum will be in Egypt, he is planning to attend a seder hosted by Shimon Shamir, the Israeli ambassador in Cairo.

WARTIME SLAVE LABORER SUES SIEMENS

By David Kantor

BONN, April 8 (JTA) -- A former slave laborer at the Ravensbruck concentration camp is suing the giant Siemens electronics company for more than \$40,000 in unpaid wages and damages.

The plaintiff, a woman, is asking a Munich court to order Siemens to pay her \$12,150 in back salary, \$25,000 compensation for suffering and \$5,000 in lost contributions to a pension program.

The case reportedly has support from the Social Democratic Party and the Green Party, both opposition parties in the Bundestag.

The woman's lawyer, Norbert Muller, said this suit is a test case which could serve as a precedent for demands from others who were used for slave labor in World War II.

Many of Germany's major industries used slave laborers, many of them Jews, provided by the concentration camps during the war. Working under excruciating conditions, many of them died. The survivors have received little compensation.

There have, however, been agreements by German firms to pay survivors, notably from the Daimler-Benz Corporation and from Feldmuhle Nobel, known during the war as Dynamit-Nobel.

NON-TRADITIONAL SEDERS ARE WAY FOR JEWS TO REACH OUT TO OTHERS

By Richard Rubin

NEW YORK, April 8 (JTA) -- When Sally Auerbach answered the Four Questions of Passover at a seder last week, her eyes flashed, her body swayed and her hands replied with exhilaration.

Auerbach, who is deaf, gave her reply in sign language at a seder designed to bring deaf and hearing Jews together.

Across town, at a "Seder of Understanding," 80 blacks, Asians, Ukrainians and other non-Jews read from a Haggadah quoting Henry David Thoreau, Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr.

Choruses of "Dayeinu" and "Down by the Riverside" rang out at yet another seder last week, this one joining young parishioners of a black Brooklyn church with students of a Jewish day school.

The parallel between the biblical exodus from Egypt and the flight of Jews from the Soviet Union was obvious for several recent immigrants at a seder held for recent arrivals, some of whom were celebrating Passover for their first time ever.

Such non-traditional seders are becoming common as American Jews expand their community and as they seek better relations with non-Jews.

The "Freedom Seder" for the Soviet Jews, held by the American ORT Federation, was Galyna Polliskoya's first ever. She left Kiev with her daughter and mother in July.

"I have a daughter, I want her to know all the Jewish customs, to know that she is a Jew."

Way To Share 'Feelings And Beliefs'

Because the Safronsky family shared a common kitchen with their non-Jewish and often anti-Semitic neighbors, they were never able to celebrate Passover in the open, she explained.

"We tried celebrating very quietly," Neyla Safronsky said. "Now I know exactly how to celebrate this celebration of freedom."

The seder at which Sally Auerbach answered the Four Questions in sign language was held by the United Synagogue of America, the association of Conservative congregations.

"This is not a seder for the deaf, but with the deaf," stressed Rabbi Jerome Epstein, executive director of the association.

The seder is a model for use by Conservative synagogues throughout North America. It included Haggadahs with sign-language translations of the Four Questions, blessings and songs.

In the past two years, United Synagogue has held model seders for Jews who are homeless and who have AIDS.

"We, as Jews, are told to reach out on Passover to bring people in," Epstein said. "Judaism and the seder have to be designed in such a way to make people more comfortable."

For the children of the Abraham Joshua Heschel School, on New York's heavily Jewish Upper West Side, and of the 224-year-old Bridge Street African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood, the seder at the Manhattan school was proof that "races can come together and share their feelings and beliefs on different things," said 13-year-old Ray Bahat, who is Jewish.

(Contributing to this report were Susan Gilman and Diane Zorcik of The New York Jewish Week.)