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BAKER'S DEPARTURE FROM MIDDLE EAST LEAVES CABINET SPLIT ON PEACE PLAN

By David Landau

JERUSALEM, April 28 (JTA) -- A serious split emerged at the highest levels of Israel's government as the Cabinet engaged in a rancorous post-mortem over the failed visit of U.S. Secretary of State James Baker.

Evidence of the gap had appeared Friday, when the government did not speak to Baker with a single voice. Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir and Foreign Minister David Levy apparently presented opposing views on key issues to the secretary of state and continued to argue them at the Cabinet session Sunday.

Baker flew home Friday upon receiving word that his 96-year-old mother had died in Houston. The abruptness of his departure was therefore understandable.

But the toughly worded parting statement read to reporters by State Department spokeswoman Margaret Tutwiler made clear he held Israel responsible for his inability, after three extended tours of the region since mid-March, to nail down a process that might yield peace.

"Questions remain here in Israel," the statement said. "We still need some answers from the Israeli government relating primarily to the modalities before we can move the process forward."

Baker made no reference to "answers" from Arab leaders during the lengthy talks with them that took up most of his tour.

By all accounts, the talks with the Arabs were even less forthcoming than the Israelis. But he managed to leave his Arab hosts on an upbeat note, jarringly absent when he left Israel.

'More Serious Things To Worry Over'

Shamir said in a Sunday morning radio interview that he believed Baker's effort would continue in the future. In any event, the prime minister had "more serious things to worry over" than the peace process. "The absorption of immigrants preoccupies me more," he said.

Nevertheless, it was the peace process that dominated the Cabinet debate Sunday.

The stumbling block was the nature of the regional conference supposed to usher in parallel peace talks Israel would hold with its Arab neighbors and the Palestinians.

Levy's ideas were closer to the scenario favored by the United States. But whatever Levy offered by way of concessions to the secretary was withdrawn by Shamir, the Cabinet learned.

"I have had to say no in my life before," Shamir told the Cabinet. He insisted there was no crisis looming with Washington and hoped the United States would persevere in its efforts.

But reports surrounding Baker's departure and subsequent U.S. media commentary have starkly highlighted the differences between Washington and Jerusalem.

According to one American commentator, Thomas Friedman of The New York Times, U.S. officials left the impression Baker was trying to administer some diplomatic "shock therapy" when he indicated that President Bush might have to reassess the U.S. approach to Middle East peace.

One major Israeli difference with the Americans was over their insistence that the conference they would host jointly with the Soviet Union should have greater scope and longevity than the brief ceremonial occasion envisioned by Israel.

Baker proposed that instead of adjourning, the conference could reconvene in six months in case of deadlocked talks, though only with the consent of both parties.

That was too much for Tehiya, one of the right-wing parties in Shamir's government that opposes territorial concessions. The idea was also rejected by the prime minister himself.

'Differences Of Nuance'

Shamir's position was supported by the most powerful elements of Likud, including Defense Minister Moshe Arens and Deputy Foreign Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Health Minister Ehud Olmert, deemed a moderate by Likud standards, backed Levy, as did Arye Deri, the interior minister who represents the Orthodox Shas party.

Both sought to minimize the split between Shamir and Levy. Olmert spoke of "differences of nuance" rather than substance and predicted that the peace process would move forward.

He said that when the prime minister opposed "continuance" of the conference beyond the start of bilateral talks, he really meant a "U.N.-type continuance" that would turn the process into a full-fledged international conference, which everyone in the government opposes.

Levy maintained that only "a political neophyte" would confuse an international conference and the regional one Baker was proposing, which could reconvene in six months only with Israel's consent.

It could not take up or decide disputed questions between the parties and therefore would not be a decision-making forum, Levy contended.

The long-term domestic political significance of the split was not immediately clear. Some observers felt that Levy, though outgunned in the Cabinet, was better attuned to the sentiments of the party's rank and file.

Those observers thought he would be vindicated and might even achieve outright victory were Likud's huge Central Committee convened to debate the issue.

Until now however, calls to convene the grassroots Central Committee have emanated from Ariel Sharon and other hard-liners, who have opposed the American peace initiative from the start.

SARI NUSSEIBEH RELEASED FROM JAIL, WAS HELD THREE MONTHS FOR SPYING

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM, April 28 (JTA) -- The Israeli military authorities on Sunday released Dr. Sari Nusseibeh, a Palestinian activist held for three months in administrative detention.

Nusseibeh, accused of spying for Iraq during the Persian Gulf war, was ordered incarcerated for six months.

But the High Court of Justice, citing the paucity of evidence against him, directed that his term be reduced by half.

Nusseibeh, who holds a Ph.D. from Oxford

University, is a professor of philosophy at Bir Zeit University in the West Bank, which has been closed by military authorities since the Palestinian uprising began more than three years ago.

Israeli authorities claim the university is a source of agitation for the intifada.

The 42-year-old academician arrived Sunday at his mother's home in East Jerusalem looking well, but appeared to have lost weight.

He is the son of the late Anwar Nusseibeh, a former defense minister of Jordan who died in the 1980s.

While his father was a close adviser to King Hussein of Jordan, the younger Nusseibeh is regarded by the Likud government as a supporter of Al Fatah, the largest faction of the Palestine Liberation Organization.

The Israeli security authorities alleged the university professor was informing the Iraqis where their Scud missiles fired at Israel were landing.

They said they did not press formal charges against him "for security reasons."

Nusseibeh denied the accusations.

His home at Abu Dis village, just outside of Jerusalem, was under constant curfew, which would have made any attempt at spying impossible, he said.

He intends to leave shortly for a sabbatical at Oxford.

ABIE NATHAN STARTS BIRTHDAY FAST TO PROTEST LAW ON PLO CONTACTS
By Hugh Orgel

TEL AVIV, April 28 (JTA) -- Peace activist Abie Nathan celebrated his 64th birthday by announcing a hunger strike beginning at midnight Sunday to protest Israel's ban on contacts with the Palestine Liberation Organization.

Nathan recently served 120 days in jail for meeting with "Palestinians associated with terrorist groups," including PLO chief Yasir Arafat, and is under advisement that he may have to return to jail as punishment for a subsequent meeting he had with PLO leaders in Tripoli, Libya.

But he considers the ban ridiculous and will continue to protest until the law is changed, Nathan told reporters and friends at his annual birthday reception at the Hilton Hotel here Saturday.

There is no need for peace talks with friends, only with enemies, if one wants to end hostilities and make peace, Nathan said.

"I'm not fasting in order to die, but so that we can all live," he said.

Nathan finances his peace activities and his disaster relief efforts -- most recently for Kurdish refugees in northern Iraq -- from advertising revenues earned by his unlicensed Voice of Peace radio station, which has been broadcasting pop music and peace messages in Hebrew and Arabic from a ship outside Israeli territorial waters for the past 25 years.

The Indian-born Nathan, who holds a civilian pilot's license, also was celebrating the 23rd anniversary of an illegal flight he made to Port Said, Egypt, on a one-man peace mission.

He had hoped at the time to meet with Gamal Abdel Nasser, who was the Egyptian president at the time, to persuade him to make peace with Israel.

But his audacious mission did not succeed, as he was promptly ousted by the Egyptian authorities.

U.N. TEMPORARILY DEPLETES FORCES IN LEBANON, GOLAN FOR USE IN IRAQ
By Hugh Orgel

TEL AVIV, April 28 (JTA) -- The United Nations is temporarily depleting its peacekeeping and truce-observer forces in Lebanon and the Golan Heights to help staff the newly formed multinational observer force on the Iraq-Kuwait border.

A convoy of 100 white-painted vehicles of the U.N. Interim Force in Lebanon crossed the Allenby Bridge from the West Bank into Jordan last week on the first leg of a three-day overland journey to Iraq.

UNIFIL is providing 680 infantry and support troops, the largest component of the 1,400-strong U.N. Iraq-Kuwait Observation Force, known by the acronym UNIKOM, which will replace American and allied troops overseeing the cease-fire that ended the Persian Gulf war.

The U.N. troops in Iraq will protect 300 unarmed cease-fire observers from 30 countries.

About 100 members of the UNIFIL headquarters and logistics division left Nakoura, Lebanon, on the border with Israel, on April 24. They flew to Kuwait from Ben-Gurion Airport.

Other troops to be stationed in Iraq are being drawn from U.N. forces in the Golan Heights and Cyprus.

UNIFIL, with 5,800 troops from nine countries, has been the largest U.N. peacekeeping force in the region since it was deployed in 1978.

UNIFIL spokesman Timor Goksel said adjustments would be made to compensate for the loss of personnel. He said the temporary absence of troops would not affect UNIFIL operations.

INTOURIST OPENS ISRAELI BUREAU
By Hugh Orgel

TEL AVIV, April 28 (JTA) -- Intourist, the Soviet state tourist service, opened its first bureau in Israel last week.

The assistant manager, Anatoly Petrushenko, was present for the opening. The Israeli daily Ma'ariv quoted him as saying that the office would promote Israeli tourism to the Soviet Union and assist tourists from the Soviet Union arriving in Israel.

Intourist already has agreements with several large tour organizers in Israel, he said.

The new office on Tel Aviv's Allenby Road will be headed by Valery Yagorev.

FRIENDS OF ISRAEL ATTEND PARLEY
By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM, April 28 (JTA) -- Israel plays host this week to about 70 of its non-Jewish friends and well-wishers from all over the world.

They are attending a three-day conference in Jerusalem arranged at the initiative of the World Zionist Organization's external relations department. Its purpose is to update the participants on developments in Israel.

The participants are members of Israel friendship associations in many countries, including Belgium, Canada, Cyprus, France, Italy, Romania, Switzerland and Czechoslovakia.

Martinique-Guadeloupe, in the French West Indies, is also represented, in the person of Dominique Bobi, who heads the Israel friendship society in those Caribbean islands.

Dr. Paul Kieusseian, president of Armenians for Israel in France, is attending, as well.

ISRAELIS ARE RACING AGAINST THE CLOCK TO GET REMAINING JEWS OUT OF ETHIOPIA
By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM, April 28 (JTA) -- A small staff remaining at the Israeli Embassy in Addis Ababa is racing against time to prepare visas for about 17,000 Jews waiting to immigrate to Israel.

Israeli officials believe the days are numbered for the regime of President Mengistu Haile Mariam, whose embattled army has suffered heavy losses in recent weeks to rebel forces.

The rebels have captured the town of Ambo, 75 miles from Addis Ababa, and are reported to be closing in on the capital. They are already said to control half the country.

There is no telling how a rebel victory would affect the departure of the country's remaining Jews or Ethiopia's relations with Israel.

Israel's Foreign Ministry has already called home most of its embassy staff and Jewish Agency emissaries. It has ordered Israeli citizens whose presence there is not essential to leave Ethiopia immediately.

Despite the turmoil, Ethiopian aliyah continues at the normal rate, according to Jewish Agency sources here. They expect about 250 immigrants to arrive on two flights at the end of this week.

The flow of Ethiopian Jews has been between 500 and 1,000 a month since January. There was a two-week interruption in March, attributed to an attempt by Mengistu to extract more weapons from Israel, though the Foreign Ministry and the Ethiopian authorities denied the allegation.

But the Bush administration apparently believes Mengistu controls the rate of departure of Jews from Ethiopia. Yediot Achronot said Sunday that Washington was ready to offer him political asylum in exchange for speeding up the departure of all Jews.

The White House announced April 24 that President Bush was sending Rudy Boschwitz, a former Republican senator from Minnesota, to Addis Ababa as his "personal emissary."

Boschwitz, accompanied by three administration officials, arrived in Addis Ababa over the weekend. According to the White House, his mission was to discuss the plight of Ethiopian Jews with Mengistu and possible solutions to the country's quarter-century-old civil war.

NEW TRIAL IS ORDERED FOR TEACHER CLEARED OF ANTI-SEMITISM CHARGES
By Gary Pogrow

VANCOUVER, British Columbia, April 28 (JTA) -- The province of Alberta has ordered a new trial for former high school teacher James Keegstra, whose 1985 conviction under Canada's anti-hate statute was recently reversed on a technicality.

The decision to retry Keegstra, announced last Thursday by Alberta Attorney General Kenneth Rostad, was generally welcomed by Canadian Jewish leaders. But other people, including the current mayor of Eckville, a position Keegstra used to hold, expressed concern that a new trial would provide a platform for Keegstra's views and endow him with an aura of martyrdom.

Keegstra was fined $5,000 in 1985 on being found guilty of wilfully promoting hatred against an identifiable group -- in his case, Jews -- a violation of Canada's anti-hate law.

As a high school teacher in Eckville, a village of about 900 in rural Alberta, Keegstra taught his classes for over a decade that Jews were behind all of the world's troubles and that the Holocaust was a hoax.

Keegstra was brought to trial at the complaint of his students' parents, none of them Jews. There were no Jews living in Eckville at the time, nor are there now believed to be any Jews living in the village.

The Alberta Court of Appeals overturned the verdict last month on grounds that Keegstra should have been allowed to challenge the impartiality of the jurors in the 1985 trial.

Rostad said the decision to retry was based entirely on the law and the evidence, which remains strong.

"The case was sent back for retrial on two technicalities, not on the evidence itself," the attorney general told the Toronto Globe & Mail.

He dismissed as a mitigating factor the high cost of the case so far, saying justice, not cost, determined whether a trial would be held.

Les Scheininger, president of the Canadian Jewish Congress, said, "It is only proper that the anti-hate provisions of the Criminal Code be invoked in this case, and that it be pursued to its ultimate resolution."

He emphasized that "for over 14 years, Keegstra subjected a captive audience of impressionable young people within a school setting to his abhorrent and noxious views."

Concern About Adverse Publicity

Manuel Prutschi, national director of human relations for the congress, said fomenting hatred is a serious crime calling for vigorous prosecution.

The League for Human Rights of B'nai Brith Canada issued a statement expressing gratification over the decision to retry Keegstra.

"The Supreme Court of Canada has recognized the importance of the legislation and the inherent dangers of hate propaganda," said Mark Sandler, national chairman of the league.

The Calgary Jewish Community Council noted in a statement that a new trial would again place Keegstra in the center of media attention, a fact it called unfortunate. Nevertheless, "Keegstra was found to be guilty by his peers and should not be deemed to be innocent due to a technicality," the council said.

But Alberta Legislator Sheldon Chumir, the Liberal Party's designated critic of the Attorney General's Office, said he "would have preferred to let matters be left to lie."

Chumir, who is Jewish, believes a new trial could prove counterproductive, giving Keegstra even more publicity and creating a martyr.

He also pointed out that a new trial could create a different chemistry. "New evidence may come in. Witnesses can do things differently; you may lose some witnesses."

But Prutschi of the CJC countered, citing a study made after the first trial of Ernst Zundel, a German-born Holocaust revisionist living in Canada. A survey found that the Zundel trial had served as a very good educational tool.

"It opened up people's eyes and touched their hearts. So it had positive rather than negative results among the greater public."

Chumir, although opposing a new trial for Zundel, said, however, that he would like to see the Alberta government get tough with racial violence.

"The government has shown a lack of concern for racist-motivated violence," he said.

REAGAN BELIEVED SS MEN BURIED AT BITBURG HAD AIDED PRISONERS

NEW YORK, April 28 (JTA) -- Former President Ronald Reagan claims that when he visited the German military cemetery in Bitburg in 1985, he was convinced some of the SS men buried there had been executed for trying to shield concentration camp inmates "from the ovens" and were buried in prisoner uniforms.

In a 1989 exchange of letters with Kalman Sultanik, vice president of the World Jewish Congress, the former president insists on the veracity of his account, though he admits he has no proof. The letters were made public a few weeks ago.

Reagan attributed his information to his German hosts. Sultanik, himself a death camp survivor, concluded that the president had been shamefully duped by them.

Reagan came under fire at home and abroad for visiting a burial place where members of the dreaded Nazi elite corps that ran the death camps were interred along with other German war dead. His visit caused particular anguish to Holocaust survivors and their families.

Sultanik, who served on the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council during the eight years of Reagan's presidency, first wrote to him in March 1989. He expressed his concern that the former president's depiction of the Bitburg episode in his upcoming autobiography could inadvertently abet the growing coterie of revisionists who claim the Holocaust never occurred.

Reagan wrote back: "As for Bitburg itself, I did some research on my own and learned that, yes, there were some SS troopers buried there, but a number of them were buried in prisoner uniforms. They had been executed for trying to shield inmates from torture and the ovens."

Cites German Sources

Sultanik replied that this claim, "not found to my knowledge in any historical literature of the Holocaust, raises a very disturbing issue."

In his response, Reagan conceded that "there is no documented evidence regarding the SS troopers buried in prisoners uniforms that I know of."

But the former president said he was convinced that was the case.

"German officials having to do with my visit were the source of this information," Reagan wrote. "It came up in their description and history of Bitburg cemetery, and they even gave me the names of the few SS men who had been so treated."

Sultanik pursued the subject, writing to the ex-president that exhaustive research and consultations with eminent historians failed to yield an iota of evidence that any SS personnel intervened on behalf of Jews or other inmates.

Reagan said in his third and final letter that while he "can't provide any source of the stories of SS troopers buried in prisoner uniforms," he was still convinced such accounts were true.

Reagan cited several informants, including one he identified as a cemetery employee, "who actually pointed out the headstone of one of the troopers who had been buried in the prisoner uniform."

Sultanik said he believed the president, "seeking to act out of good motives, was ensnared by an unspeakable distortion of history by his German hosts."

FRENCH OBSERVE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF DRANCY CONCENTRATION CAMP

PARIS, April 28 (JTA) -- The French authorities on Sunday observed the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Drancy concentration camp in a Paris suburb, where tens of thousands of Jews were herded to await deportation to Nazi death camps.

The victims were all arrested by French police.

The camp consisted of a U-shaped block of unfinished buildings guarded by French gendarmerie loyal to the Vichy regime. It was supervised by Alois Brunner, one of the last major Nazi war criminals still at large and believed to be living in Syria.

The site of the Drancy camp has changed little in a half-century. The buildings became a municipal housing project after the war.

But in the center of the block, a monument was erected recently to inform the public of what happened there.

Just behind the monument, the local municipality placed a cattle car, similar to the ones which hauled Jews to Auschwitz.

Inside, documents were placed on display to explain the meaning of "deportation" and "final solution" in the context of the car.

Simone Veil, a former Cabinet member and former president of the Parliament of Europe, attended the anniversary ceremony. Veil is one of the few Drancy detainees who survived Auschwitz.

"It is important to say again and again that what has been done to the Jews cannot be compared to anything else that has happened in the world," Veil told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency.

"There are already people in France denying the reality of the gas chambers, others who say more subtly that of course the concentration camps were horrible, but perhaps the survivors are slightly overdoing it.

"This makes me sick," Veil said. "We knew when we came back from Auschwitz that those who had not been there would find it hard to believe us, and we didn't tell everything.

"I am concerned about what will happen after we, the witnesses of the Holocaust, will disappear," she said.

TWO FORMER SS MEN GO ON TRIAL
By David Kantor

BONN, April 28 (JTA) -- Two former SS officers went on trial for murder last week in the western German city of Duisburg.

Bruno Karl Blach, 71, and Dominik Gleba, 69, are accused of killing at least five Mauthausen concentration camp inmates during a forced evacuation march when the camp was being abandoned in April 1945.

The pair had been guards at Wiener-Neudorf, part of the Mauthausen camp complex in Austria. They allegedly shot inmates who were unable to march because of poor physical condition.

Investigations of Blach and Gleba over the past 40 years were fruitless until four years ago, when an American volunteered fresh evidence against the suspects.

Blach, who lived in California, was extradited to Germany in January 1990. Gleba was arrested in January 1990 in Oberhausen, Germany.

The accused both pleaded not guilty. Their attorneys asked for dismissals on technical grounds.