

MANDELA THANKS SOUTH AFRICAN JEWS FOR CONTRIBUTION TO BLACK STRUGGLE

By Suzanne Belling

JOHANNESBURG, April 15 (JTA) -- African National Congress President Nelson Mandela has for the first time publicly acknowledged South African Jewry's "particularly outstanding contribution" to his people's "struggle for freedom and social justice."

His warm, unsolicited message on the eve of Passover was conveyed by fax to the editor of the Johannesburg Jewish Voice, the official newspaper of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies.

It was the first such communication by the ANC leader to the Jewish community here and was described by the Jewish Voice editor as "an incredible coup in black-Jewish relations."

Mervyn Smith, national chairman of the Board of Deputies, responded promptly in a letter to Mandela dated April 15.

"On behalf of the South African Jewish community, I thank you for your message, which was most moving, as well as your warm wishes for a happy Passover," Smith wrote.

Mandela said in his message that Passover, which commemorates the emancipation of the Israelites from slavery, bears a message of universal human significance that has touched the hearts of millions throughout history and transcends boundaries of geography, race or creed.

"Fellow compatriots," he wrote, "the figure of Moses, the liberator, has served as an inspiration to every people who have been compelled to struggle for their liberation."

"The immortal words he spoke to Pharaoh, 'Let my people go!' reverberates through the corridors of time. They continue to inspire us in our quest for democracy today."

Wishes Jews 'Shalom Aleichem'

Mandela went on to note that "our country today stands on the threshold of a momentous transformation which must culminate in the attainment of freedom for all South Africans. We are all required to march together to complete the last miles to freedom."

He stressed that the ANC recognized that despite its small numbers relative to the entire population, the local Jewish community has made contributions "second to none" to the development of South Africa.

He called for defeat of those forces "fanatically devoted to a discredited past, who wish to destroy all hope of a peaceful future."

He concluded his message by wishing South African Jews "Shalom aleichem. Peace be with you all during Passover."

In his reply to Mandela, Jewish Board of Deputies Chairman Smith noted that recounting the Exodus story is central to the Passover seder.

"Jews are therefore constantly reminded of the suffering that oppression brings and the importance of true freedom," he wrote.

"We hope and pray that the coming year brings a respite from violence and true freedom for all South Africans so that we may live together in peace and harmony to rebuild our great country," he said.

WHITE HOUSE OFFICIAL ASKS JEWS TO TONE DOWN CRITICISM OF U.S.

By Larry Yudelson

NEW YORK, April 15 (JTA) -- A key White House official implored American Jewish leaders this week to keep differences between Washington and Jerusalem "in perspective" and to make special efforts to "cool the rhetoric" over U.S. policy in the Middle East.

Richard Haass, a special assistant to President Bush on Arab-Israeli issues, made the appeal in a closed-door meeting here Monday with the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

The meeting was requested by Haass, who is senior director for Near East and South Asian affairs at the National Security Council.

During the session, the Jewish leaders conveyed their "anguish and anger" over Bush administration policy toward Israel, particularly its stance on guaranteeing \$10 billion in loans to help absorb immigrants, according to a spokesman for the conference.

Haass admitted that the administration had made errors in its relationship with Israel and said he regrets some of his own actions.

But there seemed little indication that his presentation would reverse the anti-Bush mood in the Jewish community, which vocally manifested itself when the president's name was booed during an address Vice President Dan Quayle made last week to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee's annual policy conference in Washington.

"Haass was really reaching out, but there are clear differences" between the administration and the Jewish community, said Lawrence Rubin, executive vice chair of the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council.

'Gut-Level Admiration' For Israel

But Haass told the Jewish leaders that the administration's relationship with the Israeli government and the Jewish community is "much more complex than the way it is caricatured."

He conceded, however, that the relationship is "troubled and not as it should be or could be," adding that "we in the administration also have our problems and our frustrations."

As examples, he cited the "surge in West Bank settlement activity" and the administration's inability to get complete answers from Israel on how it spent the \$400 million in U.S.-guaranteed loans it received last year.

He also spoke of "inflammatory public statements" concerning U.S. motives in the Middle East, among them an allegation by an Israeli Cabinet minister that the administration had barred Quayle from meeting with him.

"Despite this," Haass said, "U.S.-Israel relations are strong, there is a gut-level administration admiration for Israel's accomplishments and a genuine appreciation of the risks Israel took in acceding to the American request not to respond to Iraqi Scud attacks during the Gulf war."

As have other administration officials in recent weeks, Haass pointed to the administration's "record of accomplishments" on matters of concern to Israel and American Jewry. He noted

that "large-scale U.S. aid to Israel continues, and will in the future," he said.

The administration has "actively encouraged the right of emigration from the Soviet Union and its successor states," and is now working on behalf of Syrian Jews, he said. Prior to the meeting, Haass met with the families of Jews still trapped in Syria.

Says U.S. Has No 'Hidden Agenda'

Haass cited the repeal in December of the United Nations resolution branding Zionism as racism as another administration accomplishment.

"And a truly historic peace process was begun and continues," he said.

But he said administration officials "reject the charge that in asking Israel to freeze West Bank settlements as a condition for obtaining \$10 billion in loan guarantees, we have a 'hidden agenda' that includes plans to push Israel back to the 1967 borders, divide the city of Jerusalem once again, support a Palestinian state or create a precedent for linking American aid to Israel with U.S. political requirements."

Haass said American Jews have the right to disapprove of their government's policies toward Israel.

"I believe you can differ with Israel and still be a Zionist, just as you can differ with American policy and still be patriotic," he said.

But he added that he is "troubled by the fact that the debate in this country over Middle East policy is too shrill, given the uncertainties that surround every issue. That shrillness is not good for any of the participants in the debate.

"Let's get better at agreeing and disagreeing," he said.

One Jewish leader argued after the meeting that the problems the administration is having with Israel and its supporters are more than just a matter of bad communication.

"What's wrong is not only the communication, but some of the substance and attitude of the administration toward Israel," said David Harris, executive vice president of the American Jewish Committee.

Like other participants in the meeting, he urged Haass to carry back to the White House the need not only for better consultation but for concrete gestures and actions to buttress U.S.-Israeli relations.

No Parallel Pressure On Arabs

During the discussion, the Jewish leaders raised a number of issues, including concern that the administration did not fully understand the unanimous support of the American Jewish community for Israel's request for loan guarantees, despite differences over settlements.

"I agree this administration has some significant accomplishments regarding Israel and Jewish issues; my view is this does not justify or explain their opposition on the loan guarantees," said Rubin of NJCRAC.

After the discussion, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, executive director of the Association of Reform Zionists of America, approached Haass and asked him about the administration's balance.

"Why is the administration coming down very hard on Israel, while (peace) negotiations are under way, without there being parallel issues being placed on the Arab countries on arms control, the boycott, etc.?" asked Yoffie.

How did Haass respond? "He ducked the question," Yoffie said afterward.

STATE DEPARTMENT DENIES IT OPPOSED LOAN GUARANTEES TO GAIN SAUDI SUPPORT By Howard Rosenberg

WASHINGTON, April 15 (JTA) -- The State Department has denied promising Saudi Arabia that it would oppose loan guarantees for Israel in return for the Saudis prodding Syria and Jordan to negotiate directly with Israel.

State Department spokeswoman Margaret Tutwiler said Tuesday that she "checked with the most senior level of this department and there is absolutely no truth to that story."

The story, reported this week by the Israeli newspapers Ma'ariv and the Jerusalem Post, apparently emanated from a comment last week at the American Israel Public Affairs Committee's annual policy conference.

At a panel discussion, Martin Indyk, executive director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, a pro-Israel think tank, referred to a silent bargain having been struck between the Bush administration and the Saudi government tying loan guarantees to the peace talks.

The Israeli newspapers said the deal was struck in April 1991 in a White House meeting between President Bush and Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the Saudi ambassador to Washington.

Indyk was not available for comment, but one pro-Israel lobbyist suggested that Indyk was "speaking figuratively, not literally." The lobbyist called it "improbable" that there was such a U.S.-Saudi understanding.

Similarly, Morris Amitay, another pro-Israel lobbyist here, said he doubts the report is true.

But Amitay said the administration's "hard line" toward Israel would make Arab countries "more conducive to negotiating" with Israel.

Delays Meant To 'Mislead Israel?'

Some analysts have speculated that if the report were true, it would explain why Bush last September surprised Israel and American Jewish leaders by announcing that the United States should postpone consideration of the loan guarantees for four months.

He subsequently took a strong stand against unconditional loan guarantees for Israel after having assured American Jewish leaders that no conditions would be placed on the guarantees.

Bush said he would approve the guarantees only if Israel agreed not to start any new construction in the administered territories during the five-year proposed loan period.

Bush's September statement coincided with Secretary of State James Baker's efforts to bring about direct peace talks between Israel and its Arab neighbors. Those talks in fact opened in Madrid in October.

Ma'ariv quoted unidentified sources in Jerusalem as saying that "the delays in granting the guarantees were meant, apparently, to mislead Israel and its supporters in Washington, while President Bush intended to abide by his agreement of April of last year with Bandar."

Marvin Feuerwerker, senior strategic fellow at the Washington institute, said he had no way of assessing the story's validity except that Bandar would have had a motive to leak such a story because it would "make him look better" in the eyes of his Arab allies.

Bandar is well known for having close contacts with Bush and earlier with President Reagan even before the events leading to the Persian Gulf War.

OFFICIALS EXPRESS HOPE ISRAELI WILL BE RELEASED FROM CAIRO JAIL

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM, April 15 (JTA) -- Guarded hope was raised here Wednesday that Israeli furniture dealer David Ovitz may be released this week from an Egyptian prison, where he has been confined for more than two months on suspicion of espionage, though no charges have been filed against him.

There seemed to be a slim chance that Ovitz will spend the Friday night Passover seder with his family in Givatayim, as Israel has formally asked Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to have him freed.

Mubarak reportedly met Wednesday with his interior minister, Abdul Halim Mussa, to discuss the Ovitz case, and a decision to release him may be announced Thursday.

According to Zvi Gabai, head of the Egyptian desk at the Foreign Ministry, Israel has received a promise from Cairo that the Ovitz matter would be settled promptly. Israel has made clear to the Egyptians that Ovitz has no connection with any official bodies.

Meanwhile, the Israeli consul general in Cairo, Ronni Porat, visited Ovitz in prison Wednesday to bring him a package of Passover items.

Several young Likud activists demonstrated Wednesday outside the home of the Egyptian ambassador, Mohammed Basyouni, demanding the immediate release of Ovitz.

He was arrested early in February, shortly after the Cairo authorities seized three members of an Israeli Arab family traveling in Egypt and accused them of spying.

Farres Mussarti, 41, of Ramla, his son Majid, 21, and his 17-year-old daughter, Faya, are awaiting trial for espionage. They reportedly confessed and implicated Ovitz, who says he is innocent.

IDF SOLDIERS KILL HEZBOLLAH GUERRILLAS

By Hugh Orgel

TEL AVIV, April 15 (JTA) -- Israel Defense Force soldiers killed two Hezbollah guerrillas in a three-hour machine gun and rocket battle in the southern Lebanon security zone Tuesday morning.

One soldier was slightly wounded and was treated in the field.

The encounter, near Aishiyeh village, where Hezbollah has been active, was followed by IDF artillery and mortar attacks on the region. Israeli helicopter gunships searched a wider area for more guerrillas.

The clash was the second in the security zone since April 6, when guerrillas ambushed an IDF patrol killing two soldiers and wounding five.

A similar ambush this time was less successful. A patrol of the Golani Brigade was attacked by heavily armed guerrillas, who apparently had been waiting for them. The soldiers returned the fire and after a prolonged exchange charged the guerrilla position, killing both men.

They were identified as members of Hezbollah, the pro-Iranian Islamic fundamentalist militia that has been waging guerrilla warfare against the IDF and its allied South Lebanon Army in southern Lebanon.

The earlier ambush, which occurred near Huleh village less than two miles from the Israeli border, was staged by three Palestinian gunmen engaged in a joint operation with Hezbollah and the Islamic Jihad. They were killed.

RUSSIAN V.P. SEES ANTI-SEMITISM UP, AND NOTHING IS DONE TO COUNTER IT

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM, April 15 (JTA) -- Russia's vice president, in talks in Moscow with the head of the Jewish Agency for Israel, has admitted that anti-Semitism is increasing in the former Soviet Union and that not enough is being done to counteract it.

Alexander Rutskoi acknowledged this during an hour-long meeting Tuesday with Simcha Dinitz, chairman of the Jewish Agency Executive, whose six-day visit to the Soviet successor states ends Friday.

Rutskoi is scheduled to visit Israel next month at the invitation of Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir. He reportedly told Dinitz that Russia considers Israel to be "an important ally in the Middle East."

Rutskoi's words followed by one day the visit to Israel by popular Moscow Mayor Gavril Popov, who came to Israel as a guest of the government.

Dinitz acknowledged that the slowdown of aliyah from the former Soviet Union continues, despite unstable conditions in many places and fear of anti-Semitism.

But regardless of the absorption difficulties in Israel, every effort will be made to restore the momentum that brought more than 350,000 Soviet Jews there since free emigration began in 1989, Dinitz said.

The Jewish Agency head disclosed Wednesday that only 21,353 immigrants have arrived in Israel since the beginning of the year, of whom 17,668 were from territories of the former Soviet Union.

Dinitz paid a 24-hour visit to Minsk, capital of Belarus and once a quintessentially Jewish city. Its Jewish population dwindled at the turn of the century, with the great migration to the West, and was decimated during the Holocaust, when there were mass shootings of Jews.

Dinitz was greeted there by 700 Jews.

He was due to visit Kiev, capital of Ukraine, on Thursday to participate in a pre-Passover class for young people and visit a Jewish Agency-sponsored Hebrew-language ulpan.

Dinitz was scheduled to return to Israel on Friday on a flight from Kiev with 130 immigrants.

ITALIAN PIANIST WINS RUBINSTEIN CONTEST

By Hugh Orgel

TEL AVIV, April 15 (JTA) -- Giorgia Tomasi, a 22-year-old musician from Italy, won the seventh Arthur Rubinstein Piano Competition at the Mann Auditorium here Tuesday night.

Tomasi, the first woman to win the prestigious award, will receive the \$10,000 Judges Prize plus \$2,500 for the competitor most favored by the audience, which was determined by a poll taken while the judges deliberated.

The award was established by the Polish-born virtuoso, Arthur Rubinstein, who died in 1982 at the age of 95.

Tomasi was one of three finalists to emerge from a field of 40 contestants from 13 countries who began the grueling competition in Tel Aviv two weeks ago. She played Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No. 3.

That also was the selection of runner-up Simone Pedroni, 24, also from Italy. Third prize was taken by Ilya Itin, 25, who is from Russia. He played Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No. 2.

CANADIAN COURT SAYS DUTCH NAZI CAN'T APPEAL DENATURALIZATION

By Gary Pogrow

VANCOUVER, British Columbia, April 15 (JTA) -- The first Canadian to lose his citizenship for concealing his involvement in war crimes moved a step closer this week to being extradited to the Netherlands, where he was convicted in absentia in 1948 of collaborating with the Nazis.

The Federal Court of Appeal in Ottawa ruled that Jacob Luitjens, a retired University of British Columbia botany instructor, cannot appeal a judge's order last year to strip him of his Canadian citizenship.

The Dutch government revised its extradition treaty with Canada last year in order to obtain Luitjens, the first Canadian to lose his citizenship because of war crimes. When the Dutch first sought his extradition in 1981, their request was denied on grounds that the existing treaty did not cover collaboration.

Dutch courts had found him guilty of having been a member of the Landwacht, a police force established by the Nazis in occupied Holland to round up Jews and resistance fighters.

Luitjens escaped to South America after the war and migrated to Canada in the 1960s.

Justice Frank Collier ruled in Ottawa last October that Luitjens hid his Nazi past when he applied for Canadian citizenship in 1971. He was found guilty of acquiring it by "false representation or by knowingly concealing material."

Collier took 29 months to reach his verdict. The jurist was widely criticized for foot-dragging.

FRENCH PRIME MINISTER PROTESTS COURT RULING FOR VICHY OFFICIAL

By Michel Di Paz

PARIS, April 15 (JTA) -- French Prime Minister Pierre Berégovoy has added his voice to the growing chorus of outrage over the Paris Court of Appeal's dismissal of all charges against accused war criminal Paul Touvier.

"France was deeply moved. France feels itself hurt and I understand the general indignation," Berégovoy said in a speech to Parliament on Wednesday.

On Tuesday, the French Parliament suspended meeting in order for members to attend a memorial service for the victims of Touvier, which was organized by the Representative Council of Jewish Institutions in France and held at the Monument to the Deportation.

There, Laurent Fabius, the leader of the ruling Socialist Party, called Touvier "filth who committed abominable, horrific crimes."

French newspapers and human rights groups were among the voices crying foul after the French court on Monday dropped the charges against Touvier, who was accused of crimes against humanity. Political figures across the political spectrum have called for a reversal of the court's decision.

Berégovoy said he understood that "the attorney general has immediately appealed against this decision," which is being challenged before the Supreme Court of Appeals.

The prime minister said, "The victims of Nazism and of its accomplices today feel themselves cheated. I want to participate in their pain."

President Francois Mitterrand, visiting Turkey, told reporters there Tuesday that he was

astonished by the court's announcement. Surprise "is an understatement," he said.

Touvier, 77, headed the collaborationist Vichy militia in Lyon, where he was a close associate of the late Klaus Barbie, the local Gestapo chief.

He was charged with crimes against humanity, as was Barbie in 1988, because the statute of limitations on war crimes expired.

But before his trial could begin, the Paris Appeals Court announced it was dropping the charges for "lack of evidence" that Touvier's acts were crimes against humanity committed within an organized framework of intent to persecute or try to eradicate a people.

The widely denounced decision was seen by many as confirmation that the French judiciary is reluctant to condemn French citizens for war crimes against Jews, though it has been willing to condemn Germans for such acts.

Moreover, suspicion persists that the highest government ranks, including Mitterrand, oppose trials of former Vichy officials on grounds they could reopen old wounds and endanger civil peace.

Berégovoy may have been addressing such perceptions when he told Parliament that "criminals must be punished whatever their citizenship. We owe this to the memory of our own history. The painful pages of our national life cannot and will not be erased. One will not rehabilitate the Vichy regime."

SCHWAMMBERGER TRIAL WINDING DOWN

BONN, April 15 (JTA) -- The trial of alleged Nazi war criminal Josef Schwammberger is drawing to a close and a verdict is expected early next month, according to court sources in Stuttgart.

The verdict will be announced either on May 6 or 11, the sources said.

The trial of the former SS officer, who is accused of killing thousands of Jews, is widely considered to be the last major war crimes case that will ever be tried in Germany. It began in the summer of 1991 following Schwammberger's extradition from Argentina.

Final witnesses were being heard this week. The 80-year-old defendant, who pleaded not guilty, will have a last chance to address the court on April 27 or 28.

RIGHTIST PARTY TO GET GERMAN FUNDS

BONN, April 15 (JTA) -- The far-right Republican Party, headed by a former SS officer, has qualified for \$1.5 million in public funds as a result of its unexpectedly strong showing in Germany's regional elections two weeks ago.

The announcement was made this week by the Stuttgart-based government office that calculates the legally mandated allocations to political parties based on their election performance.

The Republicans polled 10.9 percent of the popular vote in the federal state of Baden-Wuerttemberg, compared to 3.2 percent in the 1990 elections for the Bundestag.

The party, which had only 2,300 registered members there before the elections, compiled 538,866 votes to become the third-largest political faction in the southern German state.

Because of Passover, the JTA Daily News Bulletin will not be published Monday, April 20.