

**FLEEING OUTBREAK OF WAR IN CHECHNYA,  
JEWISH REFUGEES IMMIGRATE TO ISRAEL**

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM, Dec. 27 (JTA) -- Dozens of Jewish refugees from the breakaway Russian republic of Chechnya arrived in Israel this week on a special flight organized by the Jewish Agency for Israel.

The first of three refugee groups, comprising 32 individuals, arrived in Israel on Tuesday. They were taken to hotels or to the homes of relatives and friends, Agency officials said.

During the past two months, the refugees have been fleeing the embattled Chechen province for the northern Caucasus city of Nalchik, where Jewish Agency emissaries helped them obtain the necessary travel documents.

About 40 Jewish families, comprising some 150 people, remain in the Chechen capital of Grozny, according to Agency officials.

The officials said that contact with them has been cut off because of recent shelling by Russian army troops.

Fighting in the region escalated this week following Russian President Boris Yeltsin's decision to send troops to the region to quell the republic's rebellion against Russian rule.

Chechnya declared independence from Russia in 1991, but Russia never recognized the move.

Some 27 Jewish refugees still remain in Nalchik, where most of the refugees were arriving without food, clothing or other basic necessities, Agency officials said.

Baruch Gur, director of the Eastern Europe and former Soviet Union department at the Jewish Agency, said the agency had not encouraged the refugees to flee Chechnya.

"They came on their own. It's not a case where our emissaries went into the city to bring them," he said, adding that the local government of Nalchik "was very helpful in assisting to get the right documents to leave."

About 1,500 Jews previously lived in Chechnya, but most left for Israel during the past five years. Those still in Chechnya, according to Gur, have decided to remain for personal reasons, including mixed marriages, old age, or because they do not want to abandon their property.

**BACK FROM HISTORIC VISIT TO OMAN,  
RABIN EXPRESSES HOPE FOR FORMAL TIES**

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM, Dec. 27 (JTA) -- Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin this week visited Oman, becoming the first Israeli head of state to visit an Arab Gulf nation.

Upon his return, Rabin said the two countries hope to establish formal diplomatic ties in the near future.

Rabin met with Omani leader Sultan Qaboos Bin Said on Monday to discuss the Middle East peace process and current efforts to reach a comprehensive peace in the region.

At the request of the Omani hosts, Rabin's one-day visit was not made public until its conclusion. Speaking to reporters upon his return, Rabin praised the courage of the sultan for meeting with him. He said the sultan reiterated his support for the peace process.

Israel and Oman have maintained friendly relations since the 1970s and have cooperated in areas of mutual interest. Oman's Foreign Minister Yusef Ben Alawi reportedly has made secret visits to Israel before.

One reason for the good relations is that Oman, unlike other Arab states, did not cut off ties with Egypt following the 1978 Camp David accords, which provided the basis for the 1979 Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty.

Last May, Oman hosted a round of the multilateral talks on water. The meeting was attended by an Israeli delegation headed by Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin.

Beilin paid another visit to the Gulf state in November to discuss the opening of interest sections in each other's countries.

After returning to Israel, Rabin phoned Jordan's King Hussein to brief him on the talks in Oman.

**FOCUS ON ISSUES:****LONGTIME MIDEAST PEACE ACTIVISTS  
KEEP THE FAITH DESPITE MANY SETBACKS**

By Larry Yudelson

NEW YORK, Dec. 27 (JTA) -- Robert Lifton is not interested in debating whether the cup of peace is half full or half empty.

"At long last there is a glass which is slowly filling up, and the challenge is to fill it as quickly as possible," said Lifton, chair of the international board of the U.S./Middle East Project at the Council of Foreign Relations.

During his long tenure as president of the American Jewish Congress, Lifton was a loud critic of former right-wing Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir and an outspoken proponent of negotiating with the Palestinians.

Then, 15 months ago, when Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman Yasser Arafat signed their peace agreement, it seemed as if Lifton and all the other longtime American Jewish peace activists had reached their day in the sun on the White House lawn.

Now, the picture appears markedly less bright.

\* More than 100 Israelis have died in terrorist attacks since the signing. A wave of suicide-terrorist attacks have claimed dozens of lives, many of them in the most densely populated parts of Israel.

\* The PLO has failed to fulfill its pledge to amend its covenant, which calls for Israel's destruction.

\* Aid promised to the Palestinians has only begun to trickle into the autonomous Gaza Strip.

\* Talks on advancing the process to the next stage, including elections in the West Bank origi-

nally scheduled for last July, seem to be going nowhere.

"If you look back at September of '93 and ask, 'are you better off now than then,' the answer is no," argued Herbert Zweibon, chairman of Americans For a Safe Israel and a longtime opponent of the peace process.

Many middle-of-the-road Israelis and American Jews, who were at first enthusiastic about the prospects for peace, have despaired in light of recent events.

But the staunchest advocates of peace on the left do not admit defeat, or even allow for discouragement.

Some say that ups and downs were inevitable. And others say that Israel should be making even more concessions to the Palestinians to advance the process.

Lifton responds to "I-told-you-so's" from critics of the accord with an "I-told-you-so" of his own.

"Everyone forgets what Rabin himself kept telling everybody at the beginning: This is going to be a long and arduous process with setbacks, and it's going to take a stick-to-it-ness and a real commitment," said Lifton.

"We were neither as euphoric then nor as despairing now as those who are more casual observers of the Palestinian scene," said Thomas Smerling.

Smerling is executive director of Project Nishma, a group formed to promote the dovish security policies of the Labor Party in the American Jewish community.

#### Problems From Which One Cannot Walk Away

Smerling, an activist in promoting Israeli-Arab peace for 15 years, the last 10 of them professionally, takes the long view.

"In the late 1980s, the situation was so bleak that people wondered why we were wasting our time. But there are simply some problems, no matter how daunting, from which one cannot walk away," he said.

He considers himself lucky to be living in "an era of breakthroughs," such as the signing of the peace treaty with Jordan and the general Arab warming to Israel seen in such events as Rabin's recent visit to Oman.

Though confident that "the forces of moderation will prevail," Smerling worries about the near future.

If the peace process stalls, he maintained, "terrible things can occur. There could be a war fought by missiles; there could be terrible atrocities. The question is, how many more meaningless deaths will occur before an accommodation is reached?"

The present danger, said Smerling, is "the failure to achieve tangible improvements for the Palestinian masses in Gaza. Until that is achieved, the Palestinian Authority will be in increasing jeopardy."

Lifton readily acknowledged the many setbacks and "consequences people don't like" in the present process.

"But you have to look at the alternative. You can't look at it in a vacuum," he said. "It's a delusion to think that if the peace process fails, the terror will stop. There will be more people with

more reason to resort to terror, because their hopes will be totally dashed," said Lifton.

Gary Rubin, executive director of Americans for Peace Now, puts more of the onus on Israel.

Unlike Smerling and Lifton, who echo the positions of Rabin and Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, APN takes its cues from the left wing of Israel's government.

Rubin argues that the time has come for Israel to start removing settlers from Gaza and the West Bank.

"Areas under Palestinian rule should really be under Palestinian rule," said Rubin. "It will be impossible to build confidence when you have settler cars driving through small Palestinian villages."

Rubin similarly believes that it is confidence-building measures, not condemnations, that will bring the Palestinians to fulfill their side of the accords.

"The Palestinian covenant does have to be changed," said Rubin, referring to the PLO charter calling for the destruction of Israel. Arafat promised in September 1993 to amend the document. He has until now failed to muster the quorum of PLO leadership needed to make the changes.

"But if we're really interested in changing the covenant, what needs to happen is economic aid and allowing elections to enable an elected Palestinian authority to amend the covenant," said Rubin.

#### 'The Most Minimal Degree Of Self-Rule'

Michael Lerner, editor of the left-wing Tik-kun magazine, agrees that Arafat and the PLO have not been sufficiently fortified.

He said that those pointing to Gaza's current problems as proof that Arafat is not a credible negotiating partner have it wrong.

Israel has given Gaza only "the most minimal degree of self-rule," said Lerner. Talk about Israel's "generosity" in its agreement with the Palestinians is "self-delusion," Lerner added.

"This isn't what the Palestinian movement has been fighting for. They have been fighting for a Palestinian state, a vote at the United Nations. National pride: that's the issue," said Lerner.

Israel's slow movement means Palestinians don't believe the peace process will deliver this pride, he said. "A million Palestinians who still live under military rule have continued to feel that there is no end in sight. They don't feel they have gained very much so far in this process."

Yet despite being, by his admission, "very critical" of Israel's slow pace, Lerner has not editorialized on the subject in the past half-year.

In part, he said, that reflects the rapid pace of developments and his magazine's semi-monthly publishing schedule.

But it also reflects a dilemma he likens to that of liberals during the first two years of the Clinton presidency.

"We wanted him to succeed, but thought he was taking self-destructive steps. The question was whether to make our criticisms publicly or privately, since we had good access," he said.

"The same thing is happening with Israel. We don't want (Likud leader Benjamin) Netanyahu to replace Rabin. We want Rabin to succeed, but we believe his policies are self-undermining."

## PLANS TO EXPAND SETTLEMENTS SPARK CONTROVERSY WITH NEIGHBORING ARABS

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM, Dec. 27 (JTA) -- Palestinian Authority officials warned this week that plans to expand Jewish settlements in the Bethlehem area could bring the peace process to an abrupt halt.

Maintaining that the construction plans violate the self-rule accord, the officials said they would raise the issue before the U.N. Security Council.

At the heart of the dispute is a tract of land atop a rock-covered mountain between the West Bank Jewish settlement of Efrat and the Arab village of Al-Haidr.

Residents of Al-Haidr, contending the land belongs to them, have been protesting plans to build a new housing development for Efrat.

Last week, the Arab residents blocked tractors from clearing the site.

They resumed their protests early this week, when they were joined by several dozen left-wing Israeli activists for a 24-hour vigil at the construction site.

On Tuesday, bulldozers resumed work on the new housing development for Efrat after Israeli army officials, declaring the area a closed military zone, evicted the Arab protesters and Israeli peace activists from the site.

There were some minor scuffles when the army attempted to clear the area. Some 44 demonstrators were detained, including 13 Israelis.

Among the protesters was Palestinian Authority official Saeb Erekat, who was pushed to the ground during the scuffles, according to news reports. Police said they would submit an official complaint against Erekat for kicking an Israeli soldier.

Erekat, who said this week he had papers proving the land belonged to local Palestinians, later called the site "a graveyard of the peace process."

### 'Our Village Will Be Dead'

Residents of Al-Haidr said they would lose their livelihoods if they lose the mountain.

"If they take this mountain, our village will be dead," said Hussein Salah. "All our agricultural lands are around the mountains, and we won't be able to reach them in the future."

Other Arab communities in the area are protesting similar plans to extend Jewish settlements on nearby lands.

However, Efrat local council head Yinun Ahiman contended that the lands had not been illegally expropriated by Israel.

He told Israel Television that private contractors had bought the land to build 500 housing units and that the plan had been approved by the government.

"If they have papers, they can bring their documents to the High Court to prove their rightful ownership," he said of the Arab residents. "We'll bring our papers, and the justices will decide."

Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin said he did not think the dispute over the Efrat construction would halt implementation of the peace accord with the Palestinians.

But he said that any plans to expand Jewish

settlements in the West Bank "certainly does not fit with the aims of the peace process."

Environment Minister Yossi Sarid went further, saying that all building at the site should be halted to prevent it from having a negative impact on negotiations with the Palestinians.

He said he planned to raise the issue at the next Cabinet meeting.

In a related development, the High Court of Justice heard a petition Monday from journalists who complained that the army was preventing them from covering the dispute.

The journalists said the army has been indiscriminately using its right to close off an area for security reasons and in the process was restricting free press.

At the direction of the justices, the two sides worked out an understanding for future coverage at the construction site.

## ISRAEL MARKS 10TH YEAR OF AIRLIFT AS DEBATE ON JEWISH IDENTITY GOES ON

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM, Dec. 27 (JTA) -- On the 10th anniversary of Operation Moses, the first airlift of Ethiopian Jews to Israel, government officials called on Israel's chief rabbis to recognize Ethiopian immigrants as full Jews.

"Find the courage to do this," Absorption Minister Yair Tsaban exhorted the chief rabbis, who have repeatedly questioned the authenticity of the Ethiopians' Judaism, which dates back to biblical times.

"There is no other community as proud of their Jewishness as the Jews of Ethiopia," Tsaban said at a ceremony at the president's residence in Jerusalem on Sunday.

During Operation Moses, some 7,600 Ethiopian immigrants were flown to Israel on dozens of night flights from Sudan during a 45-day period.

Thousands more Ethiopians arrived in Israel in 1991 as part of Operation Solomon.

In marking the event, President Ezer Weizman said that friendly governments had assisted in carrying out the 1984 operation, including the United States, which brought 600 Jews from the refugee camps of Sudan in cargo planes.

Weizman stressed that the immigrants were having difficulties being absorbed into the daily and religious life of Israel, but he said they were overcoming them.

The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee said this week in a statement that Ethiopian immigrants who arrived in Israel during Operation Moses and throughout the 1980s were now enjoying similar rates of employment as their Israeli-born counterparts.

Meanwhile, the ongoing debate continues over the immigration of those Jews remaining in the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa.

Under a family reunification plan, the government has agreed to bring over relatives of those Ethiopians who already emigrated to Israel.

But Israeli Embassy officials in Addis Ababa have complained that thousands of Ethiopians, including non-Jews, have flocked to the capital in hopes of receiving permission to leave.

Some Ethiopian community leaders in Israel have charged the government with trying to hold up the reunification of Ethiopian families.

**THE FROZEN CHOSEN:  
DO-IT-YOURSELF JUDAISM THRIVES  
IN FRONTIER TOWN OF JUNEAU, ALASKA**  
[Part 2 Of 2]  
By Tom Tugend

JUNEAU, Alaska (JTA) -- The town in Alaska where one finds real do-it-yourself Judaism at the grass-roots level is Juneau.

The state's capital city, population 29,000, has no rabbi, no synagogue and no community center.

What it does have are some determined Jewish families and singles who wish to perpetuate their heritage, according to Mary-Claire Bernstein, a leading community activist.

Compared to the bleak Jewish situation she found 11 years ago, when she moved here from Berkeley, Calif., as a newlywed, there have been considerable forward strides.

"We have monthly Shabbat services in private homes, although conducting them remains a challenge," she told a guest in her comfortable home.

"We are a very young group, the kids run around and we're not experts on the order of service."

Bernstein said that about 40 families and 10 singles participate in Jewish activities, each paying \$150 in annual dues, and she guessed that there are an additional 100 to 150 unaffiliated Jews in the city.

She and her husband Pete, who owns a marine supply store, are among the five or six couples in town in which both partners are born Jews. Only half of the Jewish community board members are Jewish.

Another problem is that Juneau's population is highly mobile, with many departures and arrivals, and Bernstein estimated that over the past 15 years there has been a complete turnover among Jewish residents.

**'You Have To Make It Happen Yourself'**

Yet with all the obstacles, things get done. For the High Holy Days, the community brings in a rabbi from the Lower 48, as the contiguous United States is known here.

Over the years, other communal observances have been added, including a Passover seder, Chanukah, Purim and, most recently, Yom Hashoah (Holocaust Memorial Day).

A summer camp for the kids is now a going concern.

The community has adopted a Russian-Jewish family and put on a benefit for it and for Operation Exodus, the absorption program for Russian immigrants in Israel.

In terms of education, Pete Bernstein said, "you can't buy a Jewish education for your kids here. You've got to order the books, read them yourself and then read them to your children."

In general, he said, "If you want something done, you have to make it happen yourself."

Occasionally, services are augmented by Israelis working in fish canneries during the summer or following the dream, widely touted in their native country, that there is a fortune to be made in salmon fishing.

Jews coming off the large cruise ships that anchor at the local port also drop by.

Juneau's resident Jews have little contact with national Jewish organizations.

"Occasionally, an (Anti-Defamation League) person comes up from Seattle," said Bernstein, who directs the elementary education programs at the University of Alaska Southeast.

The American Israel Public Affairs Committee "tried to get a few things going, and we did some lobbying for Israel with our legislators," she added.

"The nearest Israeli consulate is in San Francisco. I tried to become active in Hadassah and was told to join the chapter in Anchorage."

Juneau is surrounded by glaciers and can only be reached by plane or ship. It is some 570 miles from Anchorage, where half of Alaska's 3,200 Jews live.

Jews, who constitute less than 0.6 percent of Alaska's 570,000 residents, are also scattered about in outlying areas far from the main concentrations in Anchorage, Juneau and Fairbanks.

Steven Cohen is a ranger guide in Denali National Park. His folks live in Missoula, Mont., pop. 43,000, where he worked as a bicycle mechanic. But the town got too big for him and he now earns a living in various national parks in Alaska and the Lower 48.

Manning the tour desk at the Denali Park Hotel, William James makes an arresting appearance with his luxuriant black beard, multicolored yarmulke and Magen David dangling from his neck.

The son of a Gentile father and Jewish mother, James grew up non-religious in Topeka, Kan. Now 38, he decided some years ago that he would become an Orthodox Jew and embarked on a self-directed program of study.

He works in national parks the year around, in California, the Grand Canyon and Minnesota.

Keeping kosher and the Jewish holidays is not easy, but he has a stack of canned tuna in reserve and eats a lot of salads.

Absent any other Jews, he hikes into the back country for Yom Kippur, pitches his tent and conducts his personal services.

Does his unusual appearance elicit any comments from fellow workers or visitors?

Not at all, he said.

"I get a very positive reaction from people, especially if they are from New York or Florida."

**PUBLIC ACCESSING PRIVATE DETAILS**

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM, Dec. 27 (JTA) -- Police are investigating how computer listings containing personal information about every Israeli citizen ended up in the hands of at least one private company.

Israeli television reported that the company, Makbalit, was selling CD-ROM computer disks containing data on the Israeli population. The information, which is normally used by government agencies, is not for publication or general distribution.

According to the report, at the touch of a button, users of the CD-ROM can call up the age, telephone number and address of every Israeli citizen -- including the head of the General Security Services, whose identity is generally kept secret.

The head of the police investigations unit, Yosef Levy, said a search is on for the owners of the company, who he said went into hiding after getting word they were suspected of wrongdoing.