

NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ Reverberations from the election of Avraham Burg as chairman of the Jewish Agency for Israel dominated the opening session of the Agency's Board of Governors meeting in Jerusalem. Some expressed resentment at the power of the Diaspora fund-raisers, while Mendel Kaplan, chairman of the board, defended the role of the Diaspora in the partnership. It took Max Fisher, founder of the Jewish Agency, to calm the atmosphere. "Let's pick up the pieces and look into the future," the Agency's founder said. [Page 1]

■ Twelve children were converted to Judaism in Israel by the Masorti movement, the Israeli arm of Conservative Judaism. The highly publicized event at a Conservative kibbutz in the Galilee caused a stir because conversions performed in Israel by Conservative and Reform rabbis are not recognized by the country's Orthodox rabbinic establishment. [Page 3]

■ The Justice Department unit charged with investigating Nazi war criminals is investigating the wartime activities of French businessman Andre Bettencourt, who has a controlling interest in L'Oreal. The investigation comes amid new allegations against Bettencourt by French Nazi hunter Serge Klarsfeld, who held a news conference in New York. If implicated, Bettencourt could be placed on the U.S. Watch List, which bans entry into the country.

■ An Italian Jewish organization urged American Jewish groups not to meet with right-wing National Alliance leader Gianfranco Fini during his planned upcoming visit to the United States. The group said Fini is hoping that American Jews "will hand him that certificate of democracy that he has failed to receive from Italian Jews." An Italian Embassy official in New York said that if Fini did visit the United States, it would be in the spring. [Page 4]

■ An Israel Defense Force officer was killed in a training accident in the southern part of the country. Israel Radio reported that Lt. Yonatan Shalit, 22, of Nazareth Illit was killed when a jeep overturned. Another soldier, who was lightly injured, was taken to a hospital.

FOCUS ON ISSUES**Election portends change in process at Jewish Agency***By Uriel Masad*

TEL AVIV, Feb. 21 (JTA) — This week's election of Avraham Burg to become the next chairman of the Jewish Agency for Israel and the World Zionist Organization brings to a close a lengthy, complicated — and in the end, quite acrimonious — process.

Burg's election may also be the swan song of a 25-year-old election process first agreed upon by former Prime Minister Golda Meir and Max Fisher, the veteran fund-raiser who is the Jewish Agency's founding chairman.

The ascension of the 40-year-old Labor Knesset member may also portend the beginning of profound change in the complicated organizational structure of the \$500-million-a-year agency, which is the primary recipient of money raised for Israel by the United Jewish Appeal. The WZO undertakes Jewish educational efforts in the Diaspora and provides the mechanism for Diaspora Zionist organizations to participate in Jewish Agency decisions.

Burg will replace Yehiel Leket, who served as acting chairman since last February, when former chairman Simcha Dinitz stepped down after being indicted for fraud and breach of trust.

Dinitz, whose charges relate to the alleged misuse of Agency credit cards, is now on trial in Jerusalem.

Dinitz' indictment had already thrown the Jewish Agency into disarray, say observers, and the process of electing his successor did little to repair the damage.

Burg first came to prominence in 1982 as the founder and leader of the grass-roots protest movement against the war in Lebanon.

In 1984 he was named adviser to Prime Minister Shimon Peres on Diaspora Affairs. Burg is considered a rising star of the Labor Party.

'A delicate partnership'

"There can be no Jewish solidarity without a communication system between Israel and the Diaspora," Burg said in an interview prior to his election.

"And the Jewish Agency is the central communication system, with a vast untapped potential," he said. "This is a delicate partnership between two different, yet equal societies."

Burg's election as acting chairman on Wednesday — with formal approval by the Jewish Agency Assembly and WZO General Council to follow in June — came after a panel of Diaspora fund-raisers last week decided to endorse Burg and reject Leket.

The decision by the panel, the Agency's Board of Governors "advise and consent" committee, in essence put a nail in the coffin of Leket's candidacy since the committee must approve any candidate.

The Diaspora committee, headed by Mendel Kaplan, chairman of the board, made its decision Feb. 14 after meeting with Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Rabin, who had strongly backed Leket, had urged the committee to endorse both candidates and leave the final decision to the Labor Party Central Committee, which was officially charged with nominating a candidate.

With the "advise and consent" committee's decision, essentially all that was left for the central committee to do the next day was rubber stamp Burg's candidacy.

The concern among many Israelis over the balance of power in the process was highlighted by a political cartoon in the Israeli daily Ha'aretz.

The cartoon, by the noted cartoonist Ze'ev, showed a big truck carrying a smaller truck, which carried an even smaller passenger car. The small car on the top carries the words "Chairman of the Jewish Agency," the medium-sized truck, "The Labor Party" and the Israeli flag, and the big truck at the bottom of the pyramid has "Advise and Consent Committee," the American flag and dollar signs on its wheels.

This feeling of resentment was strongly manifested at Sunday's opening meeting of the Agency's Board of Governors in Jerusalem.

Chairman of the Board Kaplan opened the session by praising Leket

for his performance as acting chairman, and for not being a sore loser.

Leket, who many had praised as a good administrator and had campaigned hard for the position, responded without mincing words.

Speaking in Hebrew, he turned to Kaplan and said: "I have no problem with your words, but with what you did."

After reviewing the history of the election and selection process, he deemed it anachronistic and undemocratic. "Instead of giving your consent to a candidate, you took away Israel's right to choose," he told the board. "Your decision was one of the greatest mistakes the Jewish Agency has ever made. It is a symbol of lack of understanding and lack of partnership."

Still, Leket said he accepts the decision, will do whatever he can to ease the transition to Burg and will return to his old job as head of Department of Youth Aliyah.

After Leket's speech, a seven-point statement of the WZO Executive was read, which severely criticized the "advise and consent" committee's decision.

But the strongest attack came from Uri Gordon, head of the Agency's Aliyah Department.

"This is the time for a new agreement between us and the leaders of the federations," Gordon said. "There must be mutual respect in a partnership, but there is none between us, not on your side."

"Your decision has been a slap in the face to Israel's democracy, to the Labor party, and to Israel's prime minister, who represents 4.5 million Jews."

Gordon accused the committee of using charisma as the criterion for choosing Burg over Leket. He also took Kaplan to task, calling for his resignation.

'Let's not accuse each other'

It took Max Fisher, founder of the Jewish Agency, to calm the atmosphere.

"I was the originator of this partnership, and what I hear here today is not useful," he said. "I was the author of the 'advise and consent' committee 25 years ago. It didn't work so well this time, but let's not accuse each other of being unfair or undemocratic."

"Let's pick up the pieces and look into the future. We have too much to do. Let's continue with the business we are here for, for the sake of Israel and of the Jewish people."

For his part, Kaplan concurred that changes are afoot, and mentioned a number of alternative suggestions that would make the process work better.

Speaking to journalists after the meeting, Kaplan complained that Leket and Gordon had personalized what was really a matter of principle.

Kaplan reiterated his position that the Jewish Agency is a partnership and that the Diaspora must have an equal say in selecting the chairman.

Officials of UJA also sought to look to the future. The UJA representatives agreed that the Jewish Agency must undergo some fundamental changes, but they would not go into specifics.

"We are encouraged by Burg's election," Joel Tauber, chairman of the UJA's board of trustees, said in an interview.

Rabbi Brian Lurie, UJA executive vice president, agreed that the election process must be reviewed, but he rejected the notion that all Israelis are upset by the "advise and consent" committee's final decision.

"Avraham Burg is one of the most popular people in Israel. Every opinion poll shows him as running at 5, 6 or 7 to 1 against his rival," Lurie said.

Sources close to the process pointed out that it was

not the "advise and consent" committee who put up the candidates, but the Labor Party.

These sources attributed the crisis to a cultural gap between the Israelis and the American fund-raisers.

Shoshana Cardin, chairwoman of the United Israel Appeal, the link between UJA and the Jewish Agency, sounded similar sentiments.

In an interview, she said she believed the process was misunderstood by some and should have been better explained.

Cardin, who served on the "advise and consent" committee, said there is a need for changes and reforms in the Jewish Agency, and that the "advise and consent" committee should be reviewed in this context.

"We all have one thing in common, our concern for Israel," Cardin said. "Let's heal the wounds, and work together for that goal."

Burg, who did not attend the Board of Governors' meeting, declined to comment on the crisis, saying only, "The marriage between us is a Catholic marriage of love, though not always of convenience."

Burg said last week that Jewish education "will be the No. 1 topic on the agenda" when he takes the helm of the agency.

Until then, his hands will be full with repairing the damage and mapping out the changes and reforms he envisions. It will be up to him to put the Jewish Agency back on track. □

Rabin appoints Shin Bet head, an expert in Jewish extremism

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM, Feb. 21 (JTA) — After months of speculation, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin has selected the new head of Shin Bet, Israel's domestic intelligence agency.

The new leader of Shin Bet — who was identified only as "K." in keeping with a prohibition against publishing the identity of the head of the security service — will replace the outgoing security chief March 1.

According to Israeli news accounts, the new head is in his early 40s, was born in Jerusalem and is the son of a judge. He is also an expert in Jewish extremism.

He joined Shin Bet in the 1970s as an embassy security officer and ascended through the ranks in a variety of posts in the West Bank.

Right-wing extremists have opposed his appointment, saying he will direct his efforts against them instead of against militant Palestinians. □

Two dozen men get permission from rabbi to take 2nd wives

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — In 1994, 24 men were granted permission by Israel's Chief Sephardic Rabbi Eliahu Bakshi Doron to take second wives.

The Hebrew daily Yediot Achronot reported that in most of the 24 cases, the women were mentally ill. In others, they were out of the country and could not be reached.

In a letter to the director of the rabbinical courts and Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who also serves as religious affairs minister, Doron said that in the past year several dozen cases of "agunot," women whose husbands have refused to grant them a "get," or religious divorce, were also resolved.

In most of those cases, the chief rabbi wrote, the husband was out of the country and was convinced to grant the divorce. □

12 children adopted abroad undergo conversions by Conservatives in Israel

By Uriel Masad

TEL AVIV, Feb. 21 (JTA) — Twelve children were converted to Judaism this week by the Masorti movement, the Israeli arm of Conservative Judaism.

The highly publicized event caused a stir because conversions performed in Israel by Conservative and Reform rabbis are not recognized by the country's Orthodox rabbinic establishment.

The ceremony took place Sunday at Hannaton, a Conservative kibbutz in the western Galilee, and was officiated by three Masorti movement rabbis.

All 12 boys and girls were adopted abroad by Israeli parents. Reform and Conservative conversions performed abroad are recognized in Israel.

The adoptive parents initially approached the rabbinic courts here, but were deterred by their strict demands. As a condition of converting their children, they were asked to become fully observant, lead an Orthodox lifestyle and send their children to religious schools.

The distressed parents turned for help to Na'amat, the Labor Party women's organization. Na'amat directed them to the Masorti movement, which agreed to perform the conversion according to halachah, or traditional Jewish law.

All the parents agreed to raise the children in the traditional spirit of Judaism, and to give them a Bar or Bat Mitzvah when they come of age.

Spokesman Rabbi Ehud Bandel said the Masorti movement rejects the Orthodox establishment's narrow notion that only an Orthodox parent is suitable to raise children and convert them to Judaism.

He said that in the past the rabbinate in Israel converted children adopted abroad, but since the fervently Orthodox have become a dominant force in the religious establishment, they have placed greater demands on adoptive parents.

Immersed three times in water

The ceremony began in the kibbutz synagogue, with a prayer and a blessing. The three rabbis and the families then moved on to the mikvah, where each child was taken by a parent into the water and immersed three times while the appropriate blessing was uttered.

At the end of the ceremony each child received a Masorti movement conversion certificate.

Ofra Friedman, chairwoman of Na'amat said, "According to the adoption laws, an adopted child must be of the faith of the adoptive parent, but until now the religious establishment prevented it from happening. Now that we have completed the first phase, we proved that there is no monopoly on conversion."

Friedman urged the adoptive parents to take the conversion certificate to the Interior Ministry and demand that these children be registered as Jews. "If the Interior Ministry refuses to do so, we shall appeal to the High Court of Justice," she said.

Sephardi Chief Rabbi Eliyahu Bakshi-Doron dismissed these conversions and said they would only make the children miserable.

"They have the illusion that they were converted, but once they grow up and want to get married, they'll find out that they cannot be wed according to the halachah," he said.

Meretz Knesset member Dedi Zucker, chairman of the Knesset's Constitutional, Legal and Judicial Committee, met with both chief rabbis in the wake of the conversion ceremony.

It was agreed that the chief rabbis will meet with

Zucker's committee in order to discuss the situation. Zucker pointed out to the rabbis that the more obstacles placed in the way of adoptive parents by the rabbinate, the more parents will turn to Reform and Conservative conversions.

The rabbis promised that they would look for ways to ease the process, and put more reasonable demands on adoptive parents. □

Auerbach, renowned authority on Jewish law, dies at age 84

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM, Feb. 21 (JTA) — Some 300,000 Orthodox Jews came out Monday to mourn Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, one of the world's leading authorities on Jewish law.

Auerbach, who for nearly half a century headed the Kol Torah Yeshiva in the Bayit Vegan section of Jerusalem, died at 84 of pneumonia in Jerusalem's Shaare Zedek Hospital late Sunday night.

The funeral procession made its way from Auerbach's home in the Shaare Chesed neighborhood to the Har Hamenuhot cemetery, causing traffic jams throughout the capital.

Auerbach was born in Jerusalem in 1911 to a prestigious family. His father headed a yeshiva.

Auerbach never stepped foot outside Israel. He was a prodigy who studied at Yeshivat Etz Chaim under the tutelage of Rabbi Usser Zalman Meltzer.

While in his 20s, Auerbach authored a book on the halachic ramifications of electricity, which was well-received by leading experts on Jewish law.

Auerbach soon became a renowned arbiter of Jewish law. His opinions on issues including divorce, the Jewish definition of brain death and shmittah (the seventh year, in which the land of Israel is supposed to lie fallow) were regarded as authoritative by Jews around the world.

He was described by Rabbi Avi Shafran, spokesman for Agudath Israel of America and a former student, as "insightful, incisive and a very caring person."

At his funeral, one of his sons described him as a man who possessed the rare ability "to walk the fine line between truth and peace," a man able to cleave to the truth "while able to live in harmony with Jews of all walks of life."

Auerbach once helped design an electric wheelchair that circumvented the technical prohibitions against using electricity on Shabbat in order to permit a disabled person to have some measure of mobility on the day of rest.

He refrained from political affiliations, making a sole exception after the last Israeli elections, when he called on fervently Orthodox parties not to join the government coalition being formed with the left-wing Meretz bloc. □

(JTA staff writer Debra Nussbaum Cohen in New York contributed to this report.)

Egypt bars paper's publication

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM, Feb. 21 (JTA) — Egypt has barred distribution of the Jerusalem Post after the publication of an article that was critical of several Egyptian officials.

Israel Radio reported that the newspaper's editor-in-chief, David Bar-Illan, expressed surprise that a country which has peaceful relations with Israel would bar a newspaper because of an article that appeared in it.

The article criticized Egyptian Foreign Minister Amre Moussa and presidential political adviser Osama el-Baz for displaying insensitivity toward Israel. □

Officials pressure Germany to pay reparations to survivor

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON, Feb. 21 (JTA) — President Clinton and the Senate's majority leader, Bob Dole (R-Kan.), are asking German Chancellor Helmut Kohl to pay reparations to Holocaust survivor Hugo Princz.

Clinton reportedly raised the issue during a meeting with the German leader, who visited here earlier this month.

Members of New Jersey's congressional delegation also raised Princz's case with Kohl, handing the German leader a personal plea to pay Princz reparations.

Born in Slovakia to an American father, Princz' status as a U.S. citizen did not protect him from Nazi concentration camps, where most of his family perished. After the war, he was rescued by U.S. soldiers and bypassed the refugee resettlement camps.

Germany has argued in American courts that Princz is not entitled to reparations because he was a U.S. citizen.

Princz, who has been waging his battle in the courts and in Congress, himself petitioned the German chancellor during his visit here. The Supreme Court recently refused to hear Princz's case.

In a three-page letter to Kohl, the survivor pledged "never to give up." He signed the letter "Hugo Princz Auschwitz ID Number 36707."

Kohl told German reporters at a briefing here that he will seek a "pragmatic" solution to Princz's case but refused to elaborate further.

Rep. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) and Dole said that if Germany does not respond, they will introduce legislation calling for Germany to pay Princz reparations.

The State Department has offered to mediate, and has given Germany a Friday deadline to respond.

"Despite legitimate claims and endless effort," Germany has denied Princz reparations, Sens. Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.) and Bill Bradley (D-N.J.) and Rep. Frank Pallone (D-N.J.) wrote to Kohl.

"It is time to put this issue behind us. The best way to do that, the only way to do that, is for the Federal Republic of Germany to acknowledge Mr. Princz's tragic story and provide him with fair reparations which are long overdue," the congressmen wrote.

In his impassioned plea, Princz wrote, "I want only to be compensated in the same way that other survivors have been since the 1950s." He reminded Kohl that at the commemoration of the liberation of Auschwitz, "you stated that the 'darkest and most awful chapter in German history' was written there." □

Italian Jews urge groups not to meet right winger

By Ruth E. Gruber

ROME, Feb. 21 (JTA) — An Italian Jewish organization is urging American Jewish groups not to meet with right-wing National Alliance leader Gianfranco Fini during his planned upcoming visit to the United States.

"Finis is hoping that American Jews will hand him that certificate of democracy that he has failed to receive from Italian Jews," members of Martin Buber-Jews for Peace stated in what was called "An Open Letter to American Jews."

"We Italian Jews ask of our American brethren to help us in our daily battle to defend the memory of the Shoah (Holocaust)," the letter said. "The Jews of the world are the custodians and guardians of this memory. The words of someone who calls himself 'post-fascist' will certainly not suffice to erase that memory."

"We ask you not to meet with Gianfranco Fini."

Last month, Fini presided over the formal transformation of the neo-fascist Italian Social Movement, which he led for years, into the National Alliance, which officially aims to be a mainstream conservative movement.

The National Alliance had allied itself with the Forza Italia Party of former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and became a powerful player on the political scene. But Berlusconi resigned in December after serving seven months in office. He was replaced by Lamberto Dini, an internationally known economist who was treasury minister in the outgoing government.

The new National Alliance has formally condemned anti-Semitism and racism and recognized anti-fascism as a fundamental element of Italian democracy.

An Italian Embassy official said a date for Fini's visit could not be confirmed, but that if Fini did visit the United States, it would be in the spring.

The Buber group is a political-cultural organization dedicated to combatting racism and anti-Semitism, promoting Jewish cultural activities and promoting an Israeli-Palestinian dialogue. Its members are active in the Jewish community in Rome.

Although the letter was addressed to American Jews, it was issued as Fini left for London Feb. 14. Members of the Buber group said the message also applied to British and other foreign Jewish organizations.

On the eve of leaving for London and Paris, Fini told a news conference that the aim of the trips was to "make the National Alliance better known and to address the prejudices."

But Jewish leaders in Italy have expressed skepticism at this professed change of policy and have urged world Jewish bodies to exercise extreme caution in dealing with Fini.

The Jewish community "cannot ignore decades of a cult that was nostalgic for and militant about the Fascist years, nor the contempt of our democratic institutions professed by the neo-fascists," said Tullia Zevi, president of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities.

Zevi has repeatedly called on international Jewish groups to consult with Italian Jews before having contacts with the Italian right. She has also cautioned that Italian right-wing leaders could use contacts with Jewish organizations as propaganda to legitimize their ideology and policy.

Zevi strongly reiterated her position during a recent meeting in Rome with American Jewish Committee officials.

Elan Steinberg, World Jewish Congress executive director, said he did not know of any Jewish groups that planned to meet with Fini.

"It would be most inappropriate for any Jewish group to bypass the wishes of the Italian Jewish community," Steinberg said. □

Librarian in Budapest fired for acts deemed anti-Semitic

By Agnes Bohm

BUDAPEST, Feb. 21 (JTA) — Josef Vekerdi, an elderly Hungarian scholar, was fired from his library post because he was accused of holding anti-Semitic views.

Vekerdi, a leading member of the board of directors for a Budapest library and a member of the Hungarian Academy, reportedly declared some books — all written by Jews — to be useless, among other acts.

Vekerdi denied the charges, saying that his "wife's family and his friends are Jews." He also was accused of making discriminatory remarks about Gypsies, who are regarded by many in Hungary as second-class citizens. □