

NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ Israeli security forces were on high alert for possible revenge attacks after the killing in Gaza of a Palestinian terrorist long sought by Israel. Yehiya Ayash, a Hamas activist who topped Israel's most-wanted list for masterminding a series of suicide bombings that killed scores of Israelis, was killed in an explosion after he picked up a booby-trapped cellular phone. [Page 3]

■ Likud opposition leader Benjamin Netanyahu said he was worried by the reaction of Palestinian officials to the killing of Hamas terrorist Yehiya Ayash. Palestine Liberation Organization head Yasser Arafat called Ayash "a martyr" and blamed Israel for his death. [Page 3]

■ Three Israeli vacationers died and one was injured near Sharm el-Sheik in the Sinai, when the jeep in which they were traveling drove over a mine. The charge, apparently from a minefield laid by the Egyptians before the 1967 Six-Day War, had apparently been washed into the popular jeep route during flooding.

■ The Tel Aviv District Court was considering whether to place two suspects charged in the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in jail or under house arrest until the end of court proceedings against them. Hagai Amir, brother of confessed assassin Yigal Amir, and Dror Adani have been accused of being involved in the alleged conspiracy to kill the Israeli prime minister.

■ Argentine police raided a bookstore in the center of Buenos Aires, confiscating two magazines and one book that were deemed to be anti-Semitic. The raid was part of an effort to crack down on the dissemination of hate literature. [Page 4]

■ Secretary of State Warren Christopher briefed American Jewish leaders about the Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations during a conference call with members of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. The call came on the eve of Christopher's trip to the Middle East which is aimed at establishing a framework for continuing the negotiations.

A CUBAN REVIVAL [Part 1]**Jewish youth lead the way in a long-isolated community**

By Kenneth Bandler

HAVANA (JTA) — When Pablo Verbitzsky's father asked him to appear in a recent play about Anne Frank, the university student eagerly joined the cast of Cuban Jews.

Although he was not familiar with the poignant Holocaust story, Verbitzsky, whose mother is not Jewish, grew up with some sense of his Jewish heritage from his father, an Argentine Jewish theater director who settled in Cuba in 1961.

Now, after several months of studying at the Patronato, the main synagogue here, where there are no full-time rabbis, Verbitzsky is one of several young Jews who regularly lead Shabbat services.

The 18-year-old student converted to Judaism in November. So did 49 other Cubans, all children of interfaith couples in which the mother is not Jewish. Under Jewish law, Jewish identity is passed matrilineally.

"Everyone comes to the synagogue to be together," says a beaming Verbitzsky, expressing hope that "the community will grow."

Verbitzsky's story is emblematic of the reawakening of Jewish life on this island of 11 million people.

Located barely 90 miles from the United States, Cuba has for more than three decades been virtually cut off from the rest of the Jewish world.

Before the 1959 revolution that brought Fidel Castro to power, Cuba boasted a vibrant Jewish community of 15,000, with an array of Jewish institutions and Zionist organizations.

In the community's heyday, there were five Jewish elementary schools, one Jewish high school and five synagogues in the Cuban capital of Havana — the oldest a Sephardi synagogue dating from 1914.

Today, the Cuban Jewish community — numbering some 2,000 — is a mix of Sephardi Jews who came mainly from Turkey in the early part of this century and Ashkenazi Jews who mostly arrived as refugees from Europe before and during World War II.

Support for Castro was nearly universal among the Jews when he overthrew the dictator Fulgencio Batista.

But within two years, after Castro declared Cuba an atheistic state, nationalized businesses and other properties, and introduced communism, some 12,000 Jews joined thousands of other Cubans fleeing the country.

Most of the Jews landed in southern Florida. Others went to Mexico and Venezuela.

"Most Jews thought they cannot raise their children as Jews," says Adela Dworin, vice president of the Jewish community in Havana. "They feared civil war. Living only 90 miles from the United States, they believed it was impossible for Cuba to survive without the help of the U.S."

Among the Jews who fled were most of the community's leaders, all its rabbis and teachers, and many who had lost businesses.

Majority drifted away from Judaism

In Miami, the continuing hatred of Castro is just as strong among Jews from Cuba as it is in the general exile community.

"They believe that any Jew who stayed in Cuba was a socialist or communist," says Raquel Scheck, a Cuban Jew from Miami who recently visited Havana for the first time since leaving in 1961.

That view explains why the remnant community in Cuba remains virtually cut off from Cubans living in the United States.

"Very few Cuban Jews in Miami support Jews in Cuba," says Dr. Jose Miller, the longstanding president of the Jewish community here.

"Many of them do not approve that other Jews are sending supplies [to Cuba] because ultimately they say it will go to Castro."

Among the Jews who stayed, only a minority maintained any involvement with Judaism. Most of the community drifted away from religious life, and intermarriage was widespread.

The Patronato could barely muster a minyan, though a number of Jewish families continued to observe Shabbat and major holidays in their own homes, even though candles, bread and other supplies were scarce. For

Passover, Jews relied on packages sent from abroad, particularly from the Canadian Jewish Congress, which had access because Canada maintained ties with Cuba.

Still, Jews here could get kosher meat, a fact many here point to as a sign of the absence of anti-Semitism in Cuba.

A visitor to Cuba today finds a long-dormant Jewish community coming back to life with vigor. The revival of Jewish communal life stems in large part from a 1991 law passed by the Cuban National Assembly that allows Cubans to be members of the Communist Party and to participate in religious associations.

"Without this, the recovery of the Jewish community would not be possible," Miller says.

For more than 30 years, the daily minyan usually consisted of seven elderly men and three Torah scrolls placed in chairs in a small chapel, Miller says.

Today, 60 percent of the 100 people who come regularly on Shabbat to the main sanctuary are "youngsters," he says.

The "youngsters have a very strong Jewish feeling," Miller says. "They have education. Most important, they have Jewish soul."

When the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee began to work with the Cuban Jewish community after the 1991 law was passed, the Patronato sanctuary — not used for more than three decades — was in serious disrepair. Today, after JDC representatives led a clean-up effort, the large sanctuary is functional, though the many rows of individual cushioned seats are well-worn and numerous ceiling tiles are missing.

'Investing heavily in the people'

Because of broken windows, a hat and sunglasses are in order during Shabbat morning services. Still, the decorative pulpit and the congregation's gold-trimmed china set, with dinner plates bearing "Patronato" in gold lettering, are reminiscent of a more glorious period in the history of this grand synagogue that had barely passed its Bar Mitzvah year when the revolution occurred.

But for Alberto Senderey, who initiated the JDC's Cuba program, the state of the building is not the main concern.

What is more important is "investing heavily in the people," says Senderey, an Argentine who now heads the JDC office in Paris.

During the past four years, the JDC, which assists Jewish communities worldwide, has brought in rabbis, teachers and youth leaders from Argentina to help Cuban Jews rebuild their community.

In December, an exuberant Jewish community celebrated the 40th anniversary of the Patronato. Leaders of smaller communities across the island — Camaguey, Cienfuegos and Santiago de Cuba — came to the capital for the festivities.

Joining in the modest celebrations were about 50 leaders of the JDC, constituting the largest American Jewish group to visit Cuba in recent years.

Scheck of Miami grew up actively involved with the Patronato. The decision to visit here was "very painful," she says, given the deep animosity toward Castro.

But "I wanted to see the community here, to see the youngsters," she says.

The Patronato, which remains the center of Jewish activity in the Cuban capital, is indeed bustling.

About 150 students — ranging in age from 4 to 60 — attend Sunday school classes that, because of a lack of space, are held in the sanctuary's balcony.

In the building's only classroom, 12 young boys are training for their Bar Mitzvahs. Organizations that meet

regularly include local affiliates of Hadassah and B'nai B'rith.

In 1995, a communal newsletter called Menorah was launched.

All the teachers today are Cuban, and some of them are university students who completed a seven-month "madrich," or leadership training, course here.

At Havana's university, there are about 100 Jewish students, says Liver Maya, 21, who recently completed the leadership course.

Most of the 40 students who participate regularly in programs became involved after a core group went door-to-door, inviting them to youth-oriented events, he says.

Olga Stolick, 21, says even though both of her parents are Jewish and she grew up with an awareness of her heritage, the madrich course taught her "many things about the Jewish people and Jewish life that are helpful."

Although older members of the community are visibly delighted with the enthusiasm of the younger members, a visitor detects that behind the smiles, there is a sadness about the decades of inactivity.

As a community "we were almost dead at the end of the 1980s," says Jewish community head Miller.

"The generation of the 40- to 60-year-olds was the generation that left the community when they were young, at the time of the revolution," says Jorge Dinier, coordinator of the JDC programs in Cuba.

Havana Jewish community Vice President Dworin says, "We are the lost generation. We lost our youth."

Dworin, a university student at the time of the revolution, decided in 1960 not to leave Cuba.

"I was born here, and I felt this was the country that opened its doors to my family from Russia and Poland, and I felt I must have loyalty," she says.

"My father was afraid to leave the country without me because when he left Pinsk, he never saw his brother" and many other relatives who perished in the Holocaust, she says. As a result, Dworin's family stayed, and were among the few Jews who remained active with the Patronato. Most of Dworin's contemporaries either left Cuba or simply lost touch with the community.

Rabbi Shmuel Sztainhendler, an Argentine who on periodic visits to Cuba in the past four years has helped spark the Jewish revival, credits the dramatic growth of "Jews coming out" simply to "word of mouth."

'The beginning of Jewish families'

The community has nearly tripled in size from the 700 Jews the JDC officials found here in 1991.

Part of the growth came from the outreach to Jewish communities in smaller cities, but much of it was due to children of interfaith couples deciding to convert.

As a result, 60 percent of the community's 2,000 Jews are converts, says Sztainhendler, who was brought to Cuba by the JDC.

In addition to the 50 conversions carried out in late November, 30 circumcisions and 20 weddings were performed by two Argentine rabbis and an Argentine mohel. The three traveled by bus to three cities, carrying with them for the marriage ceremonies the only "chupah," or wedding canopy, the Patronato owns.

All conversions are done in strict accordance with Jewish law, says Sztainhendler, noting that Israel Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau visited Cuba in 1994 and approved of the conversions.

The conversions marked the end of a process for those seeking to reconnect with the Jewish people, but "most important, it was the beginning of Jewish families," says Dinier, an Argentine who completed a two-year posting here in December.

"Now, we have a lot of Jewish families." □

Israeli security on high alert after killing of Hamas terrorist

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli security forces went on high alert this week for possible revenge attacks after the killing in Gaza of a Palestinian terrorist long sought by Israel.

Yehiya Ayash, a Hamas activist who topped Israel's most-wanted list for masterminding a series of suicide bombings that killed scores of Israelis, was killed in an explosion last Friday after he picked up a booby-trapped cellular phone.

To prevent acts of retaliation, Israel imposed an indefinite closure on the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

No group claimed responsibility for the assassination.

Israeli officials would neither confirm nor deny Israel's involvement in Ayash's death.

But Islamic fundamentalist groups put the blame squarely on Israel and vowed to avenge Ayash's murder with attacks against the Jewish state.

Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat also blamed Israel for the assassination, which he called a clear violation of the Israeli-Palestinian accords.

In a speech Sunday to thousands of Palestinians at a village near the West Bank town of Hebron, Arafat called Ayash a martyr who had "died for the cause."

He said Israel had no right to carry out operations inside Palestinian autonomous areas. Israel "should not kill and assassinate on Palestinian land the struggler, the martyr Yehiya Ayash," Arafat told the crowd.

Likud opposition leader Benjamin Netanyahu said he was worried by the reaction of Palestinian officials to the killing, adding that it provided proof that Arafat was not interested in reconciliation with Israel, or in taking any measures against Hamas.

The killing came two weeks before Palestinian elections were scheduled to be held, and a week after the Palestinian Authority and Hamas had reached a tacit understanding that Hamas would halt terrorist attacks during the campaign period.

A 'delicate' time

"I think that this came at a very delicate time," Ziad Abu Ziad, who is running as an independent candidate in eastern Jerusalem, told Israel Radio. "It will incite people against the peace process and against those who support the peace process."

A number of Israeli Cabinet ministers refused to comment publicly on the killing.

One of those who did, Health Minister Ephraim Sneh, was quoted by the Israeli daily Ha'aretz as saying, "I'm happy he's no longer alive."

Sneh added that he did not think the killing would undermine the peace process with the Palestinians.

Knesset member Hagai Meir, chairman of the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, said the timing was right, regardless of who was responsible.

He also stressed that Ayash's murder had not crippled the Hamas movement, adding that Ayash had left behind "a young generation that learned the fundamentals of bombmaking from him."

In the wake of Ayash's death, Mohammed Dif became the most-wanted Hamas activist still at large, according to Ha'aretz. Dif was said to be responsible for the October 1994 kidnapping and murder of Israeli soldier Cpl. Nachshon Waxman, and for the murder of two other Israeli soldiers.

Ayash, 30, was known as "The Engineer" because of his expertise with explosives. A graduate of Bir Zeit

University in the West Bank town of Ramallah, Ayash was believed to have supplied the explosives used by suicide bombers who killed more than 60 Israelis, mostly civilians, and wounded more than 300 others in a series of attacks during the past two years.

Ayash was also considered highly adept at recruiting people who were willing to carry out the suicide attacks.

Born in the West Bank, Ayash went into hiding after the October 1994 suicide bombing of a bus in Tel Aviv that killed 22 Israelis and wounded 42 others.

Israeli forces believed that he was hiding in the Gaza self-rule area, but Palestinian officials said they did not have any information to back this up.

Ayash successfully eluded Israeli security forces, who for months attempted to locate him.

In September, the late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin reportedly told security officials that Ayash was an obstacle to the peace process and that the activities of the Hamas and Islamic Jihad fundamentalist movements must be stopped.

Hamas sources reportedly said Sunday that Ayash was killed in an apartment hideout located in the Gaza town of Beit Lahiya. The apartment was owned by Osama Hamad, 27, a Hamas activist who was reportedly Ayash's former college roommate.

When the booby-trapped cellular phone rang last Friday afternoon, Hamad answered and handed the call to Ayash, saying that it was his father.

Hamad said the phone exploded when Ayash told the caller, "I hear you, father."

Palestinian residents in the area reportedly said an Israeli helicopter was flying overhead — which prompted speculation that the phone was detonated from the air.

The cellular phone was reportedly given to Hamad by his uncle, Kamal, who was a suspected collaborator with Israel.

Kamal Hamad disappeared after the assassination.

The Palestinian Authority appointed a special committee to investigate the killing. At least five suspects have been detained.

On Saturday, tens of thousands of Hamas supporters called for a "quick and painful" revenge as they took part in Ayash's funeral procession in the streets of Gaza.

In towns and villages throughout the West Bank as well as in Gaza, Palestinians staged ceremonies Saturday and began observing a three-day mourning period with a general strike. □

Jewish trade center planned

By Miriam Widman

BERLIN (JTA) — The recent announcement of the 1997 opening of the Jewish Trade and Communication Center is another move toward rebuilding what once was a thriving Jewish neighborhood in the eastern part of this city.

The new building, which will house a permanent exhibit on Jewish culture and trade, will be located on Oranienburger Strasse in eastern Berlin's Scheunenviertel, a pre-World War II center of Jewish culture that has been undergoing a renewal.

The Jewish Trade and Communication Center will be near the newly reconstructed Neue Synagogue, which is home to Centrum Judaica, a center for Jewish learning and an exhibit on Berlin Judaism.

The private company overseeing the project has indicated that it will open a Jewish restaurant and bagel bakery. In addition, plans for a Jewish bookstore and a Judaica shop are under way as well as a service for special events and a travel agency. □

Woman who won suit against IDF fails fighter-pilot qualifying exam*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The woman who won a landmark court ruling affirming her attempts to be admitted to the Israeli air force's fighter-pilot training program has failed the qualifying exam.

A spokesman for the Israel Defense Force announced last week that Alice Miller, a 23-year-old South African immigrant, had failed the exam and would not be allowed into the air force's training program.

Miller fought a two-year court battle that culminated in a Supreme Court ruling in November granting her the right to take the exam.

In her quest to gain entry into the air force, Miller became a symbol for sexual equality in Israel.

In the wake of the court's ruling, the air force issued an invitation for female soldiers to try out for pilot training.

Miller obtained her civilian pilot's license in South Africa and studied aeronautical engineering at Haifa's Technion Institute.

She now holds an office job in the air force and because she is a soldier, she is barred from speaking to the media.

The IDF spokesman said Miller had failed the qualifying exams that every person needed to pass in order to get into flight school.

He refused to elaborate on the nature of the exams, citing security reasons.

But Miller's lawyer, Neta Ziv Goldman, reportedly said Miller had failed medical tests after passing a battery of aptitude examinations with high grades.

"The air force was fair," the lawyer was quoted as saying.

"They didn't fail her deliberately," Goldman added.

Her father, Rafi Miller, told Israel Radio last week of his daughter's disappointment.

"That's it, the story's over," he said. "Everyone who dreams of something and works hard for it and then doesn't reach it feels disappointed."

IDF officials have created a policy under which women who train as fighter pilots will be asked to make a commitment to become career soldiers and sign a promise that they will not attempt to leave duty early because of marriage or pregnancy.

The IDF has defended the policy, saying that the two-year pilot course is one of the longest and most expensive in the Israeli military.

Before the Supreme Court's ruling, the air force had turned down Miller's requests to enter pilot training, saying that women did not serve long enough in the military to justify the investment made in pilots. □

Israeli, Syrian army officers to join in next round of talks*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Army officers will be part of the negotiations when Israel and Syria convene for another round of talks later this month, members of the Israeli delegation to the peace talks said this week.

The Israeli negotiating team returned here Sunday and briefed Prime Minister Shimon Peres and Foreign Minister Ehud Barak on the discussions.

The discussions were held for six days in late December and early January at a secluded site in eastern Maryland.

At the close of the U.S.-mediated talks last Friday,

the three sides issued a joint statement saying that the discussions were "fruitful, constructive and practical."

Uri Savir, director general of the Foreign Ministry, who is heading the Israeli delegation, told Israel Radio that his team was leaving the United States with the feeling that "we have a partner that wants to reach a peace deal in 1996."

But he stressed that the sides were still far from agreement.

"There are still many gaps, and we will need much more than one round," he said.

U.S. Middle East peace envoy Dennis Ross also was optimistic.

He said more had been achieved in the six days of talks in Maryland than in the four previous years of Israeli-Syrian negotiations.

The next round of negotiations is scheduled to be held after U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher completes a round of shuttle diplomacy this week in Jerusalem and Damascus.

Christopher's trip to the Middle East region will be aimed at establishing a framework for continuing the negotiations.

Last Friday, Christopher discussed his planned trip to the Middle East during a conference call with members of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

Christopher was optimistic about the negotiations, but cautioned against "too much euphoria" prior to reaching of a final agreement, according to one of the 50 participants in the call. □

Argentine police raid store selling anti-Semitic literature*By Sergio Kiernan*

BUENOS AIRES (JTA) — In an effort to crack down on the dissemination of hate literature here, Argentine federal police have raided a bookstore in the center of the city, confiscating two magazines and one book deemed anti-Semitic.

Judge Jorge Urso, the official in charge of the Jan. 4 raid, said it was "the first step in a campaign to curb the sale and distribution of hate and racist literature in the country."

The owner of the bookstore may be charged with distribution of illegal materials in the near future, Urso said.

Books such as the notorious anti-Semitic tract "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion" is easy to obtain in newsstands and bookstores in Buenos Aires and other major Argentine cities.

According to diplomatic sources, Israeli Ambassador Itzhak Aviran had complained to Argentine authorities about the sale of such anti-Semitic literature, saying that it was not legal under the terms of anti-discrimination laws in Argentina.

In the wake of the complaint, local police compiled a list of more than 100 hundred books, tracts and magazines that could be considered anti-Semitic.

The list was then reviewed by the Delegation of Argentine Jewish Associations, the Jewish umbrella organization known as DAIA.

DAIA described 10 of the publications as "clearly biased."

According to an official who took part in the raid, the judge chose that particular bookstore for the raid because "it had an extensive collection on Nazi and nationalist subjects."

"We think that shows a militant intention to distribute this literature," the official also said. □