



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ King Hussein of Jordan received a visiting delegation of Jewish journalists from around the world at the Royal Palace in Amman. The king expressed great hopes for the future of Israeli-Jordanian peace. The visit was a follow-up to a World Zionist Organization conference in Jerusalem.

■ The Heritage Foundation has joined the ranks of think tanks opposed to stationing U.S. troops on the Golan Heights to monitor a potential Israeli-Syrian peace accord. The foundation cited the potential for terrorism, a negative impact on U.S.-Israeli relations and costs as factors in its evaluation.

■ Citing lack of evidence, Capitol police suspended an investigation into an anti-Semitic incident against a page at the House of Representatives. Last year, the Jewish congressional page awoke to find a swastika painted on the door of his dormitory room.

■ A mock vote at a high school that has accurately forecast Israeli political races for 20 years predicted defeat for the newly formed merger of the opposition Likud and Tsomet parties. Meanwhile, an opinion poll showed that the joint list would receive 37 Knesset seats, the same result as if the parties ran separately. [Page 3]

■ The head of American Friends of Bar-Ilan University apologized to the Knesset's Education Committee for the "terrible mistake" that led to the publication of a photo of Yitzhak Rabin's confessed assassin in a fund-raising brochure. He said that the editor in charge of the brochure had thought the picture was of Yigal Amir, but dismissed the possibility as too unlikely.

■ The 18-member Palestine Liberation Organization Executive Committee began discussions in the Egyptian town of El Arish to plan to convene a meeting of the Palestine National Council. Committee members had contradictory statements regarding the prospect of the PNC's revoking those clauses in the Palestine National Covenant calling for the destruction of Israel.

JEWISH PROPERTY CLAIMS [Part 1]

Restitution efforts in Europe showcased at WJC conference

By Mitchell Danow

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Along with the decimation of European Jewry, World War II was marked by the systematic confiscation of Jewish property in communities large and small throughout Eastern and Central Europe.

Whether they were herded off to death camps or driven away to safer shores by the Nazi threat, Jews left behind millions of dollars in property, both communal and individual, that has never been returned to its rightful owners.

Now, more than 50 years after the end of the Holocaust, international and local Jewish leaders are showing gradual success in bringing to a close what an American diplomat closely involved with the issue has called "the last sad, unfinished chapter from World War II."

The restitution of Jewish property claims dating back to the war years in Eastern and Central Europe is the "most important political work of the World Jewish Congress," said Israel Singer, chairman of the WJC-affiliated World Jewish Restitution Organization.

The WJRO was established in 1992 by the WJC in coordination with the State of Israel and several international Jewish organizations and Holocaust survivors groups.

Its goal is to work with local Jewish communities to pursue property claims in 13 eastern and central European countries: Belarus, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Russia, Slovakia and Ukraine.

In addition, the WJRO has recently expanded its scope of operations to pursue property claims in Western Europe, where millions of dollars more in Jewish-owned land and valuables was looted from or abandoned by Jews during the Holocaust.

"This will include France, Norway, Holland, Belgium — every country that was overrun by the Nazis," Singer said in an interview.

"There are countries in Western Europe and Eastern Europe that have our property. We want it back — and we will do anything to get it."

Government officials pledge prompt action

The issue of property restitution was a primary focus of the recently held 10th Global Assembly of the World Jewish Congress, at which some 1,200 delegates from 80 countries convened in Jerusalem to learn about the major issues confronting the Jewish world today.

During the Jan. 22-24 assembly, eight government officials from Estonia, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia and Ukraine pledged in a meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres, Foreign Minister Ehud Barak, WJC President Edgar Bronfman and Singer to seek a prompt and just resolution of Jewish property cases in their respective countries.

Although each of these countries had already taken some steps — albeit in some cases very halting ones — to deal with the restitution issue, the pledge was a significant step forward, according to Singer.

"The announcement was made not only with a Jewish organization, but with a country," he said. "It has become a bilateral agreement."

An entire afternoon session of the assembly was devoted to the restitution issue.

Delegates heard from the Clinton administration's point-man on the issue, Stuart Eizenstat, the U.S. ambassador to the European Union.

Also addressing the session was Benjamin Meed, president of the American Gathering of Holocaust Survivors, who made an impassioned plea on behalf of the aging community of survivors.

The delegates also heard from Amb. Ronald Lauder, who focused his remarks at the session on the other end of the age spectrum of eastern European Jewry — Jewish children. He asserted that a portion of compensation and restitution funds should be devoted to furthering Jewish education among the community's youth.

Lauder, a former U.S. envoy to Austria, is respected by Jewish communal officials and local politicians as a result of the Jewish kindergar-

tens, schools and summer camps he has helped to establish in several eastern European countries via the foundation that bears his name.

Elected treasurer of the WJC during the assembly, Lauder is expected to play a leading role in seeking a prompt resolution of restitution claims, according to a number of WJC officials.

Discussion of the restitution issue was also very much in evidence in the hallways of the conference.

Delegates from a number of eastern European countries could be seen meeting informally between conference sessions with Singer and other WJRO officials to seek advice or help in securing the return of local properties — ranging from a Jewish cemetery that had fallen into disrepair to a communal center whose ownership title was difficult to secure.

"These meetings here in the hallways, this is the real work of the WJRO," said Singer.

Since its founding, the WJRO has secured two powerful allies for its cause: the United States and the European Union.

In a letter dated April 10, 1995, the Republican and Democratic leadership of the U.S. Congress informed Secretary of State Warren Christopher of its firm backing of the efforts of the WJRO.

"It should be made clear to the countries involved," the letter stated, "that their response on this matter [of restitution] will be seen as a test of their respect for basic human rights and the rule of law, and could have practical consequences on their relations with our country."

Shortly after the letter was written, Eizenstat was dispatched to serve also as the U.S. Department of State's special envoy for property claims in Central and Eastern Europe.

In meetings during the past year with senior government officials in nine eastern European countries, Eizenstat emphasized "the importance the U.S. government places on non-discriminatory and internationally credible resolution of property claims — Jewish and non-Jewish," he told the WJC delegates.

The European Union solidly threw its support behind the WJRO's efforts when the European Parliament, the E.U.'s legislative body, issued a resolution last December calling on the E.U. executive and all its member states to recognize the just claims for the return of Jewish property lost in Eastern and Central Europe during World War II.

E.U. gives resolution added bite

The resolution "calls on all countries of Central and Eastern Europe which not have already done so to adopt appropriate legislation regarding the return of plundered property so that the property of Jewish communities may be returned to Jewish institutions, in accordance with the principles of justice and morality."

Giving the resolution added bite, the European Parliament decided to link the restitution policies of the countries in question to their pending applications for membership in the European Union.

Sir Leon Brittan, vice president of the European Commission, the E.U.'s executive body, gave voice to this linkage between restitution policies and E.U. membership during a speech before the WJC assembly.

Describing restitution policies as crucial to the survival of some Jewish communities in Eastern and Central Europe, Brittan said, "Any country that does not pay sufficient attention to this issue is also one that does not give sufficient respect to the principles of human rights that are part of the basic principles of the European Union."

This stance of linking restitution payments to E.U. membership may prove to have real bite given the fact that, as Eizenstat put it, "The chief domestic goal of eastern European countries is joining the European Union."

But will the WJRO's plans to launch restitution claims in Western Europe undermine the E.U.'s ability to pressure eastern European countries to return Jewish property to its rightful owners? Is there the chance that eastern European countries will accuse their western neighbors of hypocrisy on the issue if the WJRO also presses its claims in Western Europe?

"I hope that won't be the case," Eizenstat said in an interview.

"I hope that the E.U.'s making a forthright statement to Eastern Europe will help them clear up their own situations."

One WJC official who asked to remain anonymous put the matter less diplomatically.

"It doesn't matter what eastern European countries think about restitution claims in Western Europe," the official said.

"What does matter is the desire of eastern European countries to become part of the European Union. And to accomplish that, they will have to put their own houses in order where Jewish restitution is concerned."

Meanwhile, the WJRO's efforts in Western Europe began recently as the result of several factors.

"It took 50 years to build the ideological sensitivity to address these questions in Western Europe," said Elan Steinberg, executive director of the WJC. "It also took 50 years for European Jews to assert their Jewishness in the political arena."

Steinberg pointed to one other crucial factor — "the presence of archival documents indicating cash flows that became available at the end of the Cold War."

Norway expected to take action

One set of documents recently discovered by a graduate student in Norway led the WJRO to begin pressing the Norwegian government last year to return millions of dollars in property and cash that was confiscated from Jewish individuals and businesses during the war.

The WJRO is now waiting to see how a recently appointed Norwegian government commission deals with the matter.

"The next step is to see what the commission comes up with," Bronfman said at a news conference held during the WJC assembly, promising further pressure on Norway if necessary.

Bronfman also spoke about another WJRO effort launched last year — the return of unclaimed Swiss bank accounts opened by Jews prior to World War II.

After negotiating with the Swiss Bankers Association, the WJRO will soon open a new line of attack: Singer will be testifying before a Swiss parliamentary committee later this month to seek restitution of the accounts.

At the news conference, Bronfman gave a clue to the approach the WJRO is adopting with the Swiss — and, by extension, in future cases with other Western European nations.

Noting that the Swiss bankers were offering lump sums to settle the matter, Bronfman said the WJRO wants strict monitoring in place to ensure that the restitution is made in an open and accountable manner.

"I don't want to talk money," Bronfman said. "I want to talk process, to discuss how the sums are determined and distributed."

"This has to be monitored by a fair and independent party." □

Uzbekistan to allow jailed Jew to go to Israel for medical help

By Heather Camlot

NEW YORK (JTA) — A Tashkent Jew, imprisoned for some ten months for a murder he said he did not commit, was to be released this week by the government of Uzbekistan and allowed to go to Israel for medical treatment.

Dimitrii Fattakhov, 24, was expected to depart for Israel Thursday, along with his mother, Frieda.

"We are very appreciative of this humanitarian gesture by the Uzbek government," said Helene Kenvin, the family's lawyer in the United States.

Diplomats from the United States, Great Britain, and Germany visited Fattakhov Feb. 1, the first people to see him since his trial, said Micah Naftalin, national director of the Union of Councils, a Washington-based advocacy group for Jews in the former Soviet Union.

"He was just a mess," Naftalin said.

An officer from the Uzbek Foreign Ministry in Tashkent accompanied the Western diplomats, the lawyer said.

"We speculate that maybe one of the things that led to the decision to release him was when he saw how poor Dimitrii's physical condition was," Kenvin said.

Fattakhov was jailed after confessing last April to the murder of a local criminal in Uzbekistan, but the confession was obtained under duress and he is innocent, Kenvin said.

While in prison, Fattakhov was brutally beaten and tortured and his mental and physical health deteriorated to the point where he was deemed incompetent to stand trial, she said.

In December, the trial judge ordered Fattakhov to a psychiatric hospital, but he was sent, instead, to a prison hospital ward where he caught pneumonia.

The decision to release Fattakhov, made by Uzbek President Islam Karimov, comes after months of campaigning by several Jewish organizations and the American, German and British embassies.

"This campaign without question saved his life," Naftalin said.

"Everybody can take credit for this."

Rabbi Moshe Sherer, president of Agudath Israel of America, said in a statement that the decision to release Fattakhov "is tribute to the persistence of the various human rights groups that were monitoring the case, and to the good judgement of the top leaders of Uzbekistan who understood how damaging this case was becoming to their country's image on the international scene."

Fattakhov celebrated his 24th birthday on Feb. 2, the day after the decision was announced.

His mother was allowed to see him for the first time in months. □

Likud merger with Tsomet may not sway Israeli public

By Gil Sedan and Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — As the right-wing Likud and Tsomet parties put the finishing touches to their agreement to run on a joint list in the forthcoming Knesset elections, a mock vote at a high school that has accurately forecast Israeli political races for 20 years predicted defeat for the newly formed front.

The mock election at Blich High School, located in the Tel Aviv suburb of Ramat Gan, gave a resounding victory to the Labor Party and to Prime Minister Shimon Peres.

The Labor Party received 46 percent of the vote;

Likud and Tsomet, 36 percent; the left-wing Meretz Party, 10 percent; and the right-wing Third Way and Moledet parties, 6 and 2 percent, respectively.

In a separate vote for prime minister, Peres garnered 61 percent of the vote to Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu's 39 percent.

The school said that 97 percent of eligible voters in the 11th and 12th grade — some 780 students — participated in the ballot.

The school vote is traditionally held every two years.

In the past, the school has closely predicted voting trends nationwide, including the 1977 victory of Menachem Begin's Likud over Peres' Labor.

The school vote also predicted the return to power of Labor in 1992.

The vote reflected the sentiments expressed in a public opinion poll on Israel Television's Channel 2 that a merger between Likud and Tsomet would not substantially change the election results.

According to that poll, if Likud and Tsomet ran separately, Likud would receive 31 Knesset seats, Tsomet 6, Labor 43 and Meretz 8.

The poll showed that a joint Likud-Tsomet list would receive 37 seats — the same result as if the parties ran separately.

According to the same poll, Tsomet leader Rafael Eitan's dropping out of the direct vote for the premiership — a key feature of the agreement with Likud — narrowed the gap between Peres and Netanyahu in that race from 9.6 percent to 4 percent.

Likud's alliance with Tsomet represented an attempt by Netanyahu to narrow the gap with Labor in the Knesset race and to improve his own prospects in the separate vote for prime minister.

According to the agreement, seven Tsomet candidates will be included among the first 40 spots on the combined list, with Eitan given the second position on the list behind Netanyahu.

In return, Eitan dropped out of the race for the premiership, and Tsomet committed itself not to join a coalition headed by Peres, in case the Labor Party wins the elections.

The agreement was expected to be brought next week before the central committees of Likud and Tsomet for ratification.

Although Netanyahu and Eitan described the agreement as an essential unification of the "national camp," the agreement has already come under fire from within the Likud.

The most vocal criticisms came primarily from those within Likud who did not want to give up their positions on the Knesset list in favor of candidates from the Tsomet Party. □

Tree planting marks Tu B'Shevat

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Hundreds of thousands of trees were planted in public ceremonies this week, as Israelis marked Tu B'Shevat, the traditional new year for trees.

President Ezer Weizman, Environment Minister Yossi Sarid and Jewish Agency Chairman Avraham Burg were on hand Monday at the official tree-planting ceremony of the Jewish National Fund in the Jerusalem Forest near Neve Ilan.

Much of the forest was destroyed in a fire last summer.

Some 100,000 saplings have since been planted as part of a reforestation effort. □

Hebron settlers urge members of Knesset to delay withdrawal

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A group of right-wing Knesset members visiting Hebron this week was told by Jewish settlers that the planned Israeli army redeployment from the West Bank town will endanger Jewish lives and leave them in a ghetto.

"The major danger we have here is that weapons are being given to thousands of Arabs in Hebron," David Wilder, a spokesman for the Hebron Jewish settlers, told Israel Radio. "They are going to be able to be on the hilltop overlooking the Jewish neighborhoods in Hebron."

Meeting Tuesday with the Knesset members, the settlers urged them to press the government to delay the redeployment of the Israel Defense Forces in Hebron, currently planned for March.

The redeployment plan would leave the Cave of the Patriarchs, the Jewish settlements and the old cemetery under Israeli control. The Palestinian Authority would assume control over the rest of the city.

Moshe Katzav, chairman of the Likud bloc in the Knesset, said that the agreement between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization to expand Palestinian self-rule in the West Bank was totally unacceptable.

But his remarks also reflected the current debate within the Likud Party over whether to recognize the autonomy accord.

"We believe it was a very big historical mistake," he said. "But on the other side, this agreement is irreversible."

Should the Likud come to power, he said, "we have no intention to give an order to IDF to reverse the decision."

Hebron is home to some 400 Jewish settlers and 80,000 Palestinians. □

Holocaust denier evades effort to block material from Internet

By Gil Kezwer

TORONTO (JTA) — A prominent Holocaust denier in Canada has lined up the help of Internet activists in the United States to fight efforts by the German government to block access to the World Wide Web sites in which he promotes his theories.

Last year, the German government tried without success to restrict access to dozens of Internet sites promoting hate literature and pornography.

Germany's policy was followed last week by the government's blocking of access to Internet sites posting illegal messages promoting racial hatred.

Germany, which has legislation making Holocaust denial a punishable crime, took the move in large measure to prevent Ernst Zundel from propagating his Holocaust-is-a-hoax message.

Zundel, 57, a German-born resident of Toronto, countered the German government's action by enlisting the help of computer experts in the United States.

The Internet activists, operating from 10 prestigious American institutes of higher learning — including the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Stanford University, the University of Texas and the University of Pennsylvania — have created mirror sites carrying Zundel's messages.

The multiplication of alternate Zundel World Wide Web sites made Germany's ban all but unenforceable.

The cyberspace experts said that they do not support Holocaust denial, but that they helped Zundel because they oppose any effort to regulate and censor the Internet. □

Effort to stop highway project fails

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The Israeli Cabinet this week rejected an appeal by three ministers to reconsider construction of the Cross-Israel Highway.

The controversial project has been touted by some as the answer to the country's jammed roads; its critics have called the highway an environmental disaster.

Minister Yossi Beilin, Agriculture Minister Ya'akov Tsur and Environment Minister Yossi Sarid had called for the formation of a ministerial committee to review again the plans for the road.

They joined environmental groups opposed to the plan who argue that the highway will not provide an answer to the country's traffic problems and that in time it will destroy the remaining open spaces in central Israel, causing irreversible damage to the environment.

The road is planned to stretch some 190 miles from the Galilee to the Negev.

Construction of the road's first phase, a 55-mile stretch from Hadera to Gedera, has already begun.

Supporters of the project, including Housing and Construction Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, argued at Sunday's Cabinet meeting that without the road, the nation's highways would turn into one huge traffic jam.

He also said that environmental factors are being taken into account in the highway's planning. □

Islamic Jihad leader in Paraguay

By Sergio Kiernan

BUENOS AIRES (JTA) — Paraguayan police confirmed this week that a leader of the militant fundamentalist Islamic Jihad movement is at large in Ciudad del Este, the southeastern Paraguayan border town renowned as a smuggling center.

According to the Paraguayan newspaper ABC, Aiman Ez Zawahri is under the protection of "dormant cells" of Islamic Jihad in Ciudad del Este and is "beyond the reach of local police."

Zawahri was a political refugee in Switzerland until he disappeared in late 1995. At the time, the Egyptian newspaper Al Dostur reported that the Islamic terrorist left Europe for South America.

Zawahri is charged with the 1993 attempted murder of Egyptian Minister Hassan Al-Alfi.

According to the Paraguayan police, Zawahri entered South America via Brazil and soon moved to Ciudad del Este, which borders on Argentina and Brazil and is visited daily by 40,000 people, who can cross the international border by just walking over a bridge.

Paraguayan police have warned Argentine authorities that Zawahri could be in Argentina by now.

The Argentine government responded by putting border patrols and immigration authorities on alert. □

Toxic cloud forms near Beersheba

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A cloud of poisonous gas smothered the Ramat Hovav industrial zone south of Beersheba this week, forcing rescue crews to seal off roads to the site.

The cloud formed Monday after a pipe containing toxic bromine fumes exploded in the industrial zone.

A local hospital treated 10 people who were injured after inhaling the fumes. The Environment Ministry sent waste disposal experts to the scene.

The cloud dispersed after about three hours. The cause of the explosion was being investigated. □