



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ A bomb scare disrupted the opening plenary of the General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations in Seattle. Nearly 3,000 delegates, including 200 students, were evacuated from the convention center during the first official speech by the CJF's new president, Dr. Conrad Giles. The assembly reconvened Thursday amid high security.

■ U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross left the Middle East after Palestinian and Israeli negotiators failed to reach an agreement on Hebron. Talks continued, but it appeared unlikely that an agreement would be signed this week. [Page 3]

■ Israel donated \$30,000 in medical supplies to Zaire to assist people displaced by the fighting. Meanwhile, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations urged President Clinton to take "swift and forceful action" in the African nation. The Jewish War Veterans expressed opposition to U.S. participation in a humanitarian operation there.

■ President Clinton named Jordan as a major non-NATO ally of the United States, which entitles the country to "priority consideration" for military aid and equipment. Jordan attained the status, which is already enjoyed by such countries as Israel, Egypt and Japan, for its contributions to the Middle East peace process.

■ Ex-Nazi officer Jonas Stelmokas moved one step closer to deportation after a U.S. appeals court in Philadelphia upheld a lower court ruling that Stelmokas had entered the United States illegally by concealing his World War II activities.

■ N.J. Gov. Christine Todd Whitman canceled a planned tour of an archaeological tunnel near the Temple Mount in Jerusalem's Old City. She acknowledged that she had stepped into a political minefield.

■ Leptin, the protein that made headlines two years ago when it was found to reduce obesity in mice, may be a cause of adult-onset diabetes in humans, according to a new Weizmann Institute of Science study.

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

Largest Jewish relief center in former Soviet Union opens

By Lev Krichinsky

KIEV, Ukraine (JTA) — "I'm lucky because I'm not used to eating much," says 72-year-old Yevgenia Soroka, a former chemist at a Kiev military plant.

Soroka, like many of Ukraine's elderly population, has been suffering severe economic hardships since the collapse of the Soviet Union five years ago.

In Ukraine, where the economic situation is one of the most desperate among the former Soviet republics, elderly people depend on minimal pensions and are barely able to support themselves.

But now, thanks to funds provided by the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, much-needed help will be available to people like Soroka.

As a result of a major contribution from the Claims Conference, the largest welfare center for Holocaust survivors in the former Soviet Union has opened here in the Ukrainian capital.

The Chesed Avot Charity Center, which operates with the assistance of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, is one of a series of welfare projects in the former Soviet Union sponsored with the proceeds of restituted property.

Governmental officials and foreign diplomats joined members of the local Jewish community last week for the charity center's dedication ceremony.

"The new center will return to many Jews a hope for life. It will help them to live as Jews," Ukrainian Chief Rabbi Ya'acov Bleich said at the ceremony.

For Israel Miller, president of the Claims Conference, the new center has a special personal meaning.

"If my parents had not come to the United States and if I were fortunate to escape Babi Yar, I would be in the same position as you are," Miller, whose family left Ukraine in 1904, said at the ceremony.

"We consider it a holy responsibility to use the money of the people who did not survive for the benefit of the people who did," he added.

The Claims Conference, which received restitution for Jewish heirless or unclaimed property in the former East Germany, was unable until 1995 to devote any of the funds it received to programs within the former Soviet Union.

But since 1995, the Claims Conference has contributed \$12 million to projects in the former Soviet Union.

In addition to Kiev, the Claims Conference is already providing funds for Jewish welfare centers in the former Soviet cities of Kharkov, Dnepropetrovsk, St. Petersburg and Minsk.

Next year, three more centers are scheduled to open in Moscow, the Ukrainian city of Odessa and in the capital of the Moldovan republic, Kishinev.

Historical justice

By the end of World War II, about 1.2 million Jews had perished in German-occupied Soviet territory.

From 1941 to 1944, Ukraine alone had more than 200 Jewish ghettos and labor and concentration camps.

In the ensuing political atmosphere, those who survived could not speak openly about their wartime torments; they did not even dream of ever receiving compensation for their sufferings at the hands of the Nazis.

The Kiev center, which will serve as the flagship program of the Claims Conference in the former Soviet Union, is seen by many elderly Jews as historical justice, providing compensation for what they have endured.

"We as Jews have been deprived of many things during our lifetime. Now we are regaining some of what was lost," said Zvi Kagan, a retired Soviet army colonel and World War II veteran.

The Chesed Avot center, which will model its services on the welfare operations developed by the JDC during the past two years, will provide the

bulk of its services for elderly Jews in Kiev and in the neighboring region.

The area has a Jewish population of approximately 100,000, or about one-quarter of Ukraine's total number of Jews. More than half of Ukraine's Jewish population is elderly, according to Arkady Monastirsky, a member of Chessed Avot's board. He voiced the hope that the new center "will serve as a magnet for other Jewish activities and organizations in Ukraine."

Chessed Avot will offer an extensive program of social care services to Holocaust survivors, including home care for the homebound, medical consultations and equipment, and a Meals on Wheels program.

The center, headquartered in a newly renovated 3-story building that was previously a sanatorium for children with tuberculosis, will include a Jewish library, pharmacy, laundry and exercise room among its facilities.

Some Jews, especially in the small towns near Kiev, will benefit from the center's winter relief program, which will supply needy survivors with coal and firewood to heat their houses during the winter.

The center will use the services of 100 volunteers as well as of professional Jewish social workers who participated in a training program that the JDC initiated in Kiev in 1991. It is expected that about 20,000 Jews will benefit from Chessed Avot's free services before the end of this year. □

Clinton administration forms committee on religious freedom

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Reacting to ongoing human rights abuses against religious minorities around the world, the Clinton administration has formed an advisory committee of prominent religious leaders and scholars to help promote religious freedom.

The move comes after months of prodding from evangelical Christian leaders. They have been seeking to launch a campaign to end the persecution of Christians overseas, which would model the Jewish community's successful efforts to free Soviet Jews in the 1970s and 1980s.

The 20-member committee, which will report directly to the secretary of state, will provide information about the conditions religious minorities face and recommend ways religious leaders can help resolve disputes.

"Religious and ethnic conflict have often been at the forefront of human rights dilemmas in recent years," Assistant Secretary of State John Shattuck said in announcing the committee's formation.

His own experience working with Catholic, Orthodox and Muslim religious leaders in Bosnia showed him "how important it is to stand up for religious freedom and tolerance," said Shattuck, who will chair the panel.

The committee consists of religious leaders who are Jewish, Christian, Muslim and Bahai. Scholars with expertise in the Holocaust, international conflict resolution and religious diversity will also participate.

The formation of the committee "reflects a growing sensitivity that in fact there is significant religious persecution out there," said committee member Rabbi Irving Greenberg, president of CLAL — the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership.

Given the Jewish community's efforts to free Soviet Jewry — and the support it received from the American public — Greenberg said, Jews "should be particularly sensitive" to religious persecution.

"Just as we were helped, we want to help others," he added.

Deborah Lipstadt, a professor of religion at Emory

University and a member of the board of directors of the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, was also named to the panel.

Evangelical leaders, for their part, gave a tepid response to news of the committee's formation.

"It's a start," said Richard Cizik, policy analyst for the National Association of Evangelicals, which had issued a "call to action" on worldwide religious persecution in January.

The administration's move shows "our government acknowledging that religion is a growing factor in foreign policy considerations," Cizik said.

Some evangelical leaders, however, had been pressing the Clinton administration to adopt concrete policies to help curb religious persecution and protect the rights of religious dissidents.

Evangelical leaders also expressed concern that an advisory committee with such diverse racial and religious representation would be predestined to gridlock due to fundamental differences.

For that reason, evangelical leaders had urged the State Department to appoint a special adviser to focus specifically on human rights abuses against Christians around the world. They cited in particular problems in China, Cuba, Vietnam and the former Soviet Union as well as several Islamic countries, including Egypt.

The State Department resisted that idea, instead appointing a committee with a broad mandate to address religious strife everywhere.

The first meeting is expected to take place early next year. □

Polish Jewish revival aided by popular telephone hot line

By Ruth E. Gruber

ROME (JTA) — A Jewish telephone hot line set up in Poland this fall to provide information confidentially on Judaism and Jewish issues has been ringing incessantly.

"The hot line has been an unbelievable success," Stanislaw Krajewski, a Polish Jewish leader and the Warsaw consultant of the American Jewish Committee, said in an interview from Warsaw.

The phone has been "ringing non-stop during our hours of operation, Thursday evening from 5:30 to 8:00," he said. "Nineteen people called and 14 called the next week. How many people didn't manage to get through is hard to say. Probably several times more."

Until the fall of communism, it was believed that only a few thousand Jews still lived in Poland.

But during the past decade, an increasing number of people have rediscovered their Jewish roots and identity.

For many, finding out that they were Jewish was a shock.

Krajewski, who has been involved in Jewish revival in Poland for two decades, is chairman of the Jewish Forum in Poland, an organization of businesspeople and professionals aimed at creating greater Jewish awareness.

The hot line, which operates as an anonymous service, was initiated as a Jewish Forum outreach project to serve as a source of information for people who recently learned that they are Jews, who are unsure about their Jewish identity or who want to find out more about Judaism.

Nearly 3.5 million Jews lived in Poland before the Holocaust. All but about 300,000 were killed.

Tens of thousands left Poland in the late 1940s, particularly after Polish anti-Semites killed a number of returning Holocaust survivors. Another 20,000 Jews left Poland in the wake of an anti-Semitic campaign by the Communist regime in 1978. □

Talks continue on Hebron, dashing hopes for conclusion

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Hopes for the imminent conclusion of an agreement on Hebron were deflated as the week drew to a close.

Israeli and Palestinian negotiators continued contacts Thursday evening in an attempt to close the final gaps in the agreement for redeploying Israeli troops in the tense West Bank town.

But officials from both sides doubted that the agreement would be concluded overnight.

A senior Israeli political source told reporters that he doubted the agreement would be brought before the Israeli Cabinet for approval at its weekly Friday meeting.

Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat told reporters in the Gaza Strip that he was "not optimistic" a deal would be signed this week.

Further dashing expectations that the agreement would soon be signed, U.S. Special Middle East Coordinator Dennis Ross left the region Thursday.

U.S. State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns said in Paris that Washington did not expect an agreement to be concluded in the next day or two.

Reports said the main stumbling block in the talks was the Israeli demand for freedom of movement in Hebron's Arab neighborhoods to pursue suspected terrorists.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu phoned Jordan's King Hussein on Thursday and asked him to press Arafat to conclude an agreement.

The Israeli premier also telephoned President Clinton to brief him on the latest developments.

On Wednesday, Netanyahu canceled his planned trip to the United States in order to see the talks through what his office termed "this sensitive stage."

Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai on Thursday ordered all available Israeli forces to Hebron to make preparations for the redeployment, which was causing growing apprehension among Jewish residents of Hebron.

Members of the Yesha Council, which represents Jewish settlers in the West Bank and Gaza, said some protest actions against the redeployment could begin next week, including sit-in demonstrations and protests. □

Cairo economic summit ends with call for peace progress

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The Middle East-North African regional economic summit ended Thursday, with a declaration by delegates stressing the urgency of progress in the peace process, but stopping short of blaming Israel for the current stalemate.

The statement, whose wording was grappled with throughout the three-day meeting in Cairo, called for the removal of restrictions that are hindering development of the Palestinian economy.

However, it did not specifically cite Israel for imposing the closure on the territories.

While the declaration did not call for peace negotiations based on the land-for-peace principle, it did affirm a commitment to the 1991 Madrid peace conference, and to U.N. Resolutions 242 and 338, which Arab states say explicitly call on Israel to adhere to the land-for-peace formula.

Israeli officials see it differently.

Some 3,000 delegates from more than 80 countries attended the conference. The Israeli delegation included 100 business and political leaders.

In contrast to the previous two annual conferences, the atmosphere at the Cairo meeting was marred by heightened Arab-Israeli tensions surrounding the stalled peace process.

Still, Finance Minister Dan Meridor said essential contacts were made between companies, and he labeled the Cairo meeting an economic success.

Egyptian Foreign Minister Amre Moussa called for further regional development, but his remarks at a closing news conference focused on investing in projects that involved cooperation among Arab states. □

Shin Bet seeks court consent to use force in interrogation

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel's domestic security service has asked the High Court of Justice for permission to use "moderate physical force" in the interrogation of a Palestinian detainee.

According to the Shin Bet, Islamic Jihad member Muhammad Abdel Aziz Khamadan had "essential" information on a terrorist attack planned for the near future.

Earlier this week, the court issued a temporary ban on the use of physical force until it ruled on a petition submitted by Khamadan.

Originally from a West Bank village in the Ramallah area, Khamadan was deported to Lebanon more than three years ago as part of a mass deportation of Islamic Jihad and Hamas activists by then-Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

He was later allowed to return to his home, but has since been detained a number of times by Israeli security forces.

Israeli security forces went on high alert at the end of last month, after receiving warnings that the Islamic Jihad group was planning to carry out a terrorist attack inside Israel.

Security forces believed that an Islamic Jihad cell had possibly infiltrated into Israel and was awaiting a green light from its operators.

In the past, the Shin Bet has asked to use moderate physical force in interrogations, stating that some detainees may have knowledge about a pending terrorist attack. □

Palestinian stock exchange to open

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The Palestinian Authority has signed an agreement with the Palestine Securities Exchange, setting the legal framework to run the first stock market in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Some \$2 million has been invested in the infrastructure of the exchange building, which officials said would open soon in the West Bank town of Nablus.

Palestinian exchange officials estimated that up to 65 public companies with a total capitalization of about \$1 billion would be initially listed on the exchange. □

Arab teen suspected of terror plot

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli police have arrested a 16-year-old Palestinian from Bethlehem on suspicion of planning a terrorist attack.

The teen-ager was arrested Tuesday near the home of Infrastructure Minister Ariel Sharon in Jerusalem's Old City. He was armed with two knives, a Koran and a note stating that he wanted to be a martyr.

The youth told police that he was on his way to prayers, and that the knives were used to slaughter doves and rabbits. □

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

Portugal Jewish life reviving as expulsion anniversary nears

By Tom Tugend

LISBON (JTA) — While much of the Jewish and Hispanic world marked the quincentennial of the 1492 edict expelling the Jews from Spain, a similar death knell to Jewish life in Portugal, only four years later, has barely been noted.

For Portugal's tiny Jewish community, the Dec. 4-5 commemoration of the 500th anniversary of their ancestors' expulsion or forced conversion represents a kind of coming out of the closet.

On the first day, in the scheduled presence of President Ezer Weizman of Israel and President Jorge Sampaio of Portugal, the first new Portuguese synagogue to be built in almost 70 years will be dedicated in the town of Belmonte in the northeastern part of the country.

That evening, the play "From the Expulsion to the Inquisition," by Carlos Avilez, will premiere in Lisbon.

The next day, the National Assembly will meet in special session and dignitaries will gather at the site of a planned memorial, the first of its kind, marking the expulsion and the routes taken by Portuguese Jews in their new diaspora.

One of the routes led to Amsterdam, where the exiles established a flourishing colony. Their later descendants became the first Jews to set foot in New Amsterdam, now known as New York, in 1654.

The Jewish population of Portugal peaked in 1492, when some 150,000 Spanish Jews fled to the neighboring country, hoping for a permanent refuge. They resumed their wanderings four years later or, like the native Jews, underwent forcible conversions.

Today in Lisbon, traces of past Jewish life and suffering remain in the narrow, winding alleys of the medieval Jewish quarter, in the Madelena and Alfama districts, and in Rossio Square, site of the Palace of the Inquisition, whose minions burned 1,300 Jews at the stake.

Kosher food imported

Some 300 families now are officially registered with the Lisbon Jewish community. There is no permanent rabbi, kosher food is imported and, except for holidays, it is difficult to muster a minyan.

Yet, there are two synagogues, the Sephardi Shaare Tikvah and the smaller Ashkenazi Ohel Yaacov.

On Sukkot, when a small group of visiting American Jewish journalists visited the small congregation, services were led by Samuel Levy, a retired economist, aided by the economic attache of the Israeli Embassy in Lisbon.

Aside from some skinhead graffiti, there are few signs of overt anti-Semitism in Portugal, said Levy, "but one doesn't talk about being Jewish."

Among the country's 10 million inhabitants, nearly all Catholic, "there is a profound ignorance about Judaism," Levy added.

Some of this ignorance in Portugal is slowly being dispelled as democracy is taking firm roots and there are closer media and political links with the rest of Europe.

There is even a boom in studies of Portuguese Jewish history, encouraged by the recently elected Sampaio, who makes no secret of his descent from a Jewish grandmother.

Indeed, the remarkable aspect of Jewish life in Portugal is how a few energetic individuals have taken it upon themselves to reinvigorate their communities or dig, quite literally, into their remote past.

One such person is Helena Elias da Costa of

Belmonte, where the new 3-story synagogue and its mikvah will be dedicated in December.

This town of 35,000 is a historical curiosity; it is the home of about 100 Marrano families, who, though their ancestors were formally converted 500 years ago, have retained forms of Jewish ritual and consciousness.

Herself raised in a Marrano family, da Costa formally converted to Judaism when she married her physician husband, Carlos, in 1979.

Her example has been followed by 70 of the 100 families, with the rest, including da Costa's parents, opting to retain their Marrano ways.

A 22-year-old rabbi from Brazil, Shlomo Haber, is staying in town for six months and ministers to the Jews and Marranos equally. He doubles as the community's ritual slaughterer and proudly showed visitors the sukkot erected by his congregants.

As for da Costa, a high school arts teacher, she has turned her spacious home into a Judaica museum, wears a Magen David around her neck and takes care of three cats, named Golda Meir, Isaac Bashevis Singer and Oskar Schindler.

Her most lasting monument may be a 12-foot-high menorah, made of welded steel, which she designed herself. The menorah stands permanently on one of Belmonte's main streets.

Equally remarkable is Carmen Dolores Pirra Balesteros, a historian at the University of Evora, 90 miles east of Lisbon, and a self-made archaeologist.

The 35-year-old Catholic woman decided as a graduate student to focus on the history of Zionism and messianism. She now spends most of her energy and slender personal resources excavating 15th-century synagogues, or possible synagogue sites, in Evora, in the hilly mountain village of Castelo de Vide, and in Valencia de Alcantara, on the Spanish side of the border.

In Evora's old Jewish quarter, along the Rua Da Moeda (Street of Coins), Balesteros pointed to odd indentations at the front entrances of houses. She believes that mezuzot were affixed at these spots, but hastily removed and replaced by crucifixes when their owners were forcibly converted. Balesteros' next ambition is to establish a Jewish studies department at the University of Evora.

Influx of tourists

For the medieval history buff, there are other interesting Jewish sites in Portugal.

In the town of Tomar in central Portugal, for instance, a well-preserved 15th-century synagogue and mikvah have been transformed into an eclectic Jewish museum. Caretaker Luis Vasco, an old navy man, proudly said that even though only two Jewish families live in Tomar, a Yom Kippur service was held four years ago, thanks to an influx of Jewish tourists.

The occasion was marked by a procession through town with a Torah scroll, donated by the Bevis Marks synagogue in London.

A more recent edifice is a synagogue, built in 1928, which serves the small Jewish community in the northern port city of Oporto.

Long isolated, Portugal's tiny Jewish community is now reaching out to its brethren in Israel and the Diaspora, with the encouragement of the Portuguese government.

"Though few in number, the Jews of Portugal have deep historical roots," said Eyal Propper, first secretary of the Israeli Embassy in Lisbon. "It is important that Jews from other countries, especially the United States, come here and visit them." □

(Tom Tugend recently visited Portugal as guest of the Portuguese National Tourist Office and TAP Air Portugal.)