



## NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ **U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher is dispatching his top Middle East negotiator to Israel.** Dennis Ross' visit to the region is an effort to aid the "recent drift in the peace process," Christopher said. [Page 3]

■ **Israeli warplanes fired rockets into strongholds in southern Lebanon of the Islamic fundamentalist group Hezbollah.** The raid came after Hezbollah gunmen attacked an outpost where a top Israeli army official was visiting. [Page 3]

■ **The Hamas fundamentalist group called for a Palestinian uprising and for renewed attacks against Israel.** In a statement issued by the movement, Israelis were referred to as "sons of monkeys and pigs."

■ **Former Israeli Justice Minister Ya'acov Ne'eman was charged in a Tel Aviv court with perjury and obstruction of justice in the trial of Shas Knesset member Aryeh Deri.** Ne'eman stepped down from the Cabinet earlier this year, after the attorney general decided to initiate an investigation.

■ **The International Committee of the Red Cross admitted that it knew of the persecution of Jews in Nazi concentration camps but felt powerless to speak out during the war, according to just-released files.** In addition, the Nazis let Red Cross workers into the camps in March 1945 to ensure prisoners' safety, but not remove them. The information was in wartime files released by the Red Cross and given to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

■ **New York City said it would rescind more than \$800,000 in contracts with a Brooklyn Jewish social services agency whose officials have been accused of stealing funds.** The disruption of these contracts with the Council of Jewish Organizations of Boro Park could have a damaging effect on immigrants.

■ **Some 58,000 Jews from the former Soviet Union immigrated to Israel in 1996, according to the Jewish Agency for Israel.** The flow represents a 12 percent drop from 1995.

## AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD [Part 1]

### Croatian government strives to revamp relations with Jews

By Ruth E. Gruber

ZAGREB, Croatia (JTA) — On the first night of Chanukah, Ognjen Kraus, the president of Croatia's 2,000-member Jewish community, took the stage of Zagreb's modern Lisinski concert hall and lit the candles on a 3-foot-tall menorah.

With television cameras trained on him, Kraus recited the Chanukah blessings in Hebrew before an audience that included President Franjo Tudjman and other dignitaries.

A narrator told the story of Chanukah, and the candles then burned brightly throughout a concert of Prokofiev, Bruch and Mendelssohn.

The high-profile candle-lighting was part of celebrations marking the 190th anniversary of Zagreb's Jewish community.

The attendance of Tudjman and other senior officials was part of continuing efforts by the Croatian government to demonstrate support for Jewish causes and to cancel the negative image brought by its autocratic, nationalist policies.

"Taking everything into account, it was positive that Tudjman attended," said one Zagreb Jew.

"The concert reminded Zagreb and Croatia of history — what happened in history — and showed that we are still here.

"But on the whole, maybe it was more important for Tudjman to be there, than for us."

Tudjman's government has been accused of trying to whitewash Croatia's fascist past through various initiatives aimed at rehabilitating the homegrown fascist Ustashe regime that ruled Croatia as a Nazi puppet state during World War II.

These moves have drawn sharp protests from Jews as well as former anti-fascist partisans and others inside Croatia.

They have also drawn international criticism and blocked Israel from establishing diplomatic relations.

Tudjman drew particular fire earlier this year by declaring that he wanted to rebury the bones of Croatian fascists at a Yugoslav-built memorial to scores of thousands of Jews and Serbs slaughtered at the Ustashe's Jasenovac concentration camp.

Tudjman also wanted to turn the camp into a memorial of reconciliation.

"They don't want to admit that the [wartime] Independent Croatian State was a racist state," said Vlasta Kovac, editor of the Zagreb Jewish community's Bulletin.

"They would prefer if this was forgotten."

### Standing firm against the rehabilitation of fascism

This tendency toward revisionism, rather than overt anti-Semitism, raises concern among Croatian Jews.

Some 25,000 Jews lived in Croatia before World War II.

About 20,000 members of the community were killed by the Nazis or the local Ustashe regime.

Of the 2,000 members of Croatia's Jewish community today, some 1,400 live in Zagreb, the capital.

"We stand firm against the rehabilitation of fascism and against some crazy concessions given to ex-fascists who came back to Croatia," said Zagreb community member Melita Svob.

"But we are loyal citizens of this country, patriotic. We are against any kind of discrimination against anyone."

Croatian Jews report that there is no threat to their community from overt acts of anti-Semitism, either on the part of the public or governmental authorities.

A well-publicized letter from Croatian Jewish leaders a year ago said, "There is no open anti-Semitism in Croatia, either in everyday life or in any political party program, or in the attitude of government representatives toward Jews."

The letter expressed the view that "the Republic of Croatia is paying

attention to the standpoints of our community and there is a mutual dialogue."

Jewish leaders meet with Tudjman and other senior officials, and several Jews have prominent government positions.

"The Jewish community is small but functioning," Slobodan Lang, an adviser to Tudjman, said in an interview. Lang, whose father was Jewish, maintains ties with the community.

"It is taking public positions relative to the government, positive and negative," he added. "It can be critical of the president but also communicative."

Lang said the negative aspect of Croatia's image was distorted.

"Humans are humans," he said. "They are more impressed by the negative than the positive, more by [instances of] anti-Semitism than by a concert attended by the president."

Besides the attempts at historical revisionism, recent negative trends include the bitter complaints over Croatia's property restitution policy and Tudjman's continuing attacks of his critics.

Shortly after the Chanukah concert, he blasted people who complain about human rights and lack of media freedom in Croatia as enemies seeking to subvert the Croatian state.

He named prominent critics — including Slavko Goldstein, a former president of the Jewish community.

More positive trends include the government's funding of the reconstruction of the Zagreb Jewish community building after it was hit by a terrorist bomb in 1991, its cooperative relationships with aid organizations such as the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and the honors it has paid to Jews and Jewish causes.

On another positive note, Tudjman toned down statements in a book that were viewed as anti-Semitic and apologized for giving offense.

But some Jewish community members and observers voice concern over what they see as an uncomfortable aspect: an official attitude that seems to use its support for Jews as a means of demonstrating human rights principles and counterbalancing the negative image of nationalism and historical revisionism.

"The Jewish community in Croatia and in other former Yugoslav republics is not endangered by anti-Semitism," Zagreb historian Ivo Goldstein wrote in a report prepared in the spring for the American Jewish Committee.

"Its bigger enemy is a low standard of living, insincere philo-Semitism and the constant threat that the local Jewish population can be manipulated and used in propaganda goals."

Before and during the recent wars in Yugoslavia, officials in both Croatia and Serbia attempted to win Western support by showing favor to Jews and Israel.

This attitude is still apparent. "Every side in the Yugoslav war was trying to use the Jews, to make friends with the Jews," Goldstein said in an interview.

Said a member of the Zagreb Jewish community: "They think that we are important because we have connections with the Jewish world, with the World Jewish Congress, with Israel.

"This is what gives us some weight." □

## JDC medical teams tending returning Rwandan refugees

By Alissa Kaplan

NEW YORK (JTA) — A medical team dispatched by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee has been tending to the flow of Rwandan refugees heading home from Tanzania.

More than 100,000 refugees streamed into Rwanda earlier this week, and hundred of thousands were expected to follow, Gideon Taylor, JDC assistant executive vice president, said Tuesday.

Hordes of people throughout Central Africa have been turned into refugees because of the region's ethnic strife.

The crisis is largely based on enmity between the Hutu and Tutsi tribes.

The Tanzanian nation has demanded that all of its more than 500,000 Rwandan refugees leave by the end of the year.

But reports emerged this week that thousands of the refugees are heading back to the Tanzanian camps they abandoned after being corralled by militants.

The two-person JDC team based in Kibongo, Rwanda, includes Art Fost, an American Jew from New Jersey.

Fost and a nurse have a mobile medical unit, from which they treat a one-mile stretch of a "huge column of refugees," said Taylor, who is based in New York.

The team is in the "eye of the storm," Taylor added.

Another JDC team, headed by American Rick Hodes, is still at work in Kigoma, Tanzania.

Hodes and the two other members of his team — the three are at separate sites in Tanzania — provide medical care for tens of thousands of mostly Zairian and Burundian refugees.

The JDC has had a presence in the region since the 1994 civil war in Rwanda, which saw the massacre of hundreds of thousands of people and which precipitated the current crisis in the region.

Funding for all the medical programs comes from special donations to the JDC Open Mailbox, which is supported by a coalition of 39 Jewish groups.

The JDC is the coalition's operating arm.

The medical teams work in partnership with the International Rescue Committee, a U.S.-based group.

Meanwhile, another American Jewish group, MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger, announced a \$25,000 grant to support emergency feeding efforts in Rwanda. □

## Court to adult siblings: Mother cannot be frozen

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A Tel Aviv court has rejected the request of two adult siblings to freeze the body of their deceased mother so that they could someday bring her back to life.

The Tel Aviv Magistrates Court on Tuesday also ordered that a funeral for Miriam Be'eri, who died two weeks ago, be held this week.

The Tel Aviv court added that the family's proposal to fly the body abroad to be frozen in ice was not feasible.

Siblings Moshe and Rachel Be'eri then suggested to the court that the corpse be stored in wax until a way to freeze her is found.

Earlier this week, the brother and sister told the Tel Aviv court that they had even purchased a special freezer — at their mother's request — to store her at home.

Moshe Be'eri told Israel Radio, "It's very hard to separate from her, emotionally and physically.

"It's our and her desire to give her a chance to come back, one day."

A Health Ministry official told the Tel Aviv court that the woman could not be stored in a freezer because of decomposition. □

## U.S. envoy heads to Israel to conclude Hebron agreement

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON (JTA) — In an effort to stem the “recent drift” in the peace process, Secretary of State Warren Christopher said this week that he would dispatch his top Middle East negotiator to Israel.

“The president and I have been concerned about the recent drift in the peace process,” Christopher said Thursday at his year-end press conference, the last one of his tenure.

Special Middle East Coordinator Dennis Ross will travel to Israel this weekend and return before Christmas to seek the elusive accord on an Israeli redeployment in Hebron, Christopher said.

Days after President Clinton said Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s settlement policy was “absolutely” an obstacle to peace, officials in his administration have begun calling on Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat to do his part to conclude the Hebron negotiations.

“It is time for the parties to come into agreement on Hebron,” Christopher said. “The Israelis have made some moves in connection with Hebron. We think it’s time for the Palestinians, for Chairman Arafat, to respond to those moves.” At the same time, Christopher reiterated his criticism of Israel’s settlement policy. “We feel that settlement activity does have the effect of causing problems for complicating the peace process,” he said.

Christopher appealed for vigilance against terrorism during the stalemated talks.

“I strongly urge President Arafat and all those who are involved to take every action that they can to ensure that there is no recurrence of violence, because violence can only aid the enemies of the peace process,” he said.

In Jerusalem, Netanyahu dismissed American criticism of Israel’s settlement policy.

Netanyahu said at a Cabinet meeting Thursday that his settlement plans were no different from what he told Clinton when he took office in June.

A Cabinet statement announced that “the principle of the policy is to continue construction within the framework of the borders of existing settlements; private lands will not be expropriated for the construction of homes; decisions on new settlements will be made only by the full Cabinet.”

### ‘Attempt to exaggerate’

Netanyahu went on to say that contrary to what critics claimed, this policy did not violate the Oslo accords.

Netanyahu told his ministers that Israel’s problem lay in its public relations, and he called on Cabinet members to intensify efforts to explain government policy.

In the Jordanian capital of Amman, Foreign Minister David Levy said international criticism of Israel’s settlement policy had blown the issue out of proportion.

Speaking to reporters after meeting Thursday with King Hussein and Jordanian Prime Minister Abdul Karim al-Kabari, Levy said, “The cry that has emanated regarding the question of settlements is purely an attempt to exaggerate this issue.”

Jordanian Information Minister Marwan Muashar repeated at the news conference recent statements from his country’s leaders that settlements represented a direct threat to Jordanian security.

The Israeli policy encourages the idea that Palestinians should move across the Jordan River into the Hashemite kingdom to make room for expanded West Bank settlements, he said. □

(JTA correspondent Naomi Segal in Jerusalem contributed to this report.)

## Senior IDF officer wounded on visit to southern Lebanon

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Sporadic fighting in southern Lebanon continued Thursday, with Israeli fighter jets rocketing Hezbollah targets north of the security zone.

The air strikes took place after Hezbollah gunmen fired mortar bombs at a post of the South Lebanon Army, Israel’s ally in the region, during a visit there by a senior Israeli officer.

Maj. Gen. Amiram Levine, head of the Israeli army’s northern command, was visiting the position near the village of Barachit when the attack took place. Levine was unharmed, but another officer with him, Brig. Gen. Eli Amitai, head of the Israel Defense Force’s liaison unit in southern Lebanon, was lightly wounded.

This was the second time in a week that Amitai sustained light injuries in a Hezbollah attack. Over the weekend, he was wounded in a Hezbollah ambush of an IDF convoy in which he was traveling.

After Thursday’s mortar attack, two Israeli planes fired rockets into two Hezbollah strongholds.

Reports from Lebanon said two Lebanese civilians were wounded, but Israeli sources had no independent confirmation.

Thursday’s fighting took place amid reports of two attacks this week on Syrian targets in Lebanon.

In the first, a bomb exploded near Syrian military intelligence headquarters. In the other, shots were fired on a Syrian van traveling on the Lebanese highway, according to the Israeli daily Ha’aretz. There was no confirmation of who launched the attacks. □

## Iran claims Israel’s posture blocked search for airman

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Senior Iranian officials have charged that hard-line positions by the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu have blocked progress in efforts to secure information about missing Israeli airman Ron Arad.

Israeli officials denied the charges, which appeared this week in the German daily Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung.

“Because of Netanyahu’s stubbornness, the Arad matter will not be concluded by the end of the year, as was planned,” sources close to Tehran were quoted as saying.

Arad’s fighter plane was shot down over Lebanon in 1986.

The publication also quoted officials in Bonn who are involved in German efforts to obtain information about Arad as saying that little progress was being made in the contacts.

Senior Israeli officials negotiating Arad’s release denied the report’s claims. According to these sources, the parties who were holding Arad, not Jerusalem, were responsible for creating difficulties.

Israeli officials have repeatedly maintained that Iran is holding him.

Iranian officials quoted in the article said they recently received hints from Syria that Damascus, and not organizations operating in Lebanon, held the key to information on Arad’s fate.

According to the Iranian sources, Syria had requested that Arad, if released, not reveal where he had been held. Netanyahu’s representative rejected this request, the sources said.

Netanyahu’s political adviser, Dore Gold, denied the claims. □

## Vanished Vilna Torahs fuel Jewish rescue action

By Eric J. Greenberg  
New York Jewish Week

NEW YORK (JTA) — Alan Nadler's face contorted in horror as he saw dozens of deteriorating Torah scrolls lying naked and untended, like body bags, on steel cabinets in a converted Roman Catholic Church in Vilna, Lithuania.

There were nearly 100 of the badly damaged sacred texts, each one identified with a numbered tag hanging from its wooden handle.

They gathered dust underneath a fresco of the Virgin Mary, in an Eastern European city that before the Holocaust was one of the great centers of Jewish learning.

"It was like in a morgue," Nadler, director of research at YIVO, the institute devoted to Jewish and Yiddish culture, said when he saw the parchment texts, including smaller scrolls that could have been of Esther and Ruth.

"They were in terrible condition. It was a desecration," he said.

Outraged, he protested to the custodians of the scrolls, officials from the Lithuanian National Library. That was in 1990.

When Nadler returned in 1992, the Torahs were gone, never to be seen again.

"The head of the library assured me they were properly being taken care of," Nadler said in an interview. "But he would not take me to see them. They had vanished."

Last week, Nadler, for the first time, met with representatives of a number of American Jewish national agencies to discuss the fate of the Torahs as well as the tens of thousands of rare but crumbling 200-year-old Hebrew and Yiddish books and records — the legacy of the nearly destroyed Jewish culture of Vilna.

Many of the texts are lying unidentified in the dilapidated church that now serves as a warehouse for the Lithuanian library system.

### Prevent acting at cross purposes

The unprecedented meeting, called by the National Foundation for Jewish Culture, included representatives from about 25 agencies, including the National Conference on Soviet Jewry, the American Jewish Committee, the Telse Yeshiva in Cleveland, the United Jewish Appeal Chicago office and the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

A representative from the Library of Congress and U.S. Sen.-elect Richard Durbin (D-Mich.) also were present.

After a two-hour meeting at the Manhattan headquarters of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, the group agreed to establish a central coordinating body to ensure that the disparate agencies not act at cross purposes, according to Jerome Chanes, program director at the National Foundation.

The group agreed to establish a steering committee that would act as the coordinating body and information clearinghouse for the coalition.

The committee will consist of Chanes, Max Gitter of YIVO and Mark Levin from the National Conference.

The coalition also agreed to establish priorities for surveying and cataloging the texts and for other "archival needs."

"I think the meeting was a productive one," said Chanes, adding that for the first time, the premier experts on this subject had gathered in one room.

"There was a lot of information shared, and a lot

of intensive discussion" about the complex background of the situation, including navigating the political leadership of Vilna, which claims the books as its own.

Chanes said it was clear that YIVO would be the central agency in the coalition.

The group also discussed strategies and tactics. "As far as tactical matters, there are disagreements," he said.

It was not clear how the establishment of the coordinating body would affect the individual efforts of its members, such as YIVO, to win the release of the archives.

For more than seven years, YIVO has been negotiating — with limited success — with the constantly changing political leaders in the Lithuanian government for the return of the books and archives.

Nadler said the rightful owners of the texts are the functioning heirs of the Lithuanian Jewish organizations that survived the Holocaust.

Lithuanian leaders and some in Vilna's surviving Jewish community of about 4,000 argue that the texts must stay in the city, even if it means building a state-of-the-art library building with essential climate control features to prevent further deterioration of the texts.

To be sure, the organizations come with their own agendas.

The groups also have differing strategies on how to preserve the books and texts and on how to ensure that they will be properly cataloged and made accessible to scholars worldwide.

For example, YIVO head Nadler is calling for the texts to be brought to America and returned to his group, to the Telse Yeshiva in Cleveland and to other Jewish organizations.

The yeshiva owned some of the books that have been identified.

But Israeli scholars are calling for the texts to be permanently housed in Israel.

### 'Sacred obligation'

Other groups, such as the American Jewish Congress, have supported the notion of keeping the texts in Vilna, an idea Nadler abhors.

"That would be like someone coming and robbing your house, taking your VCR and television and stereo, and calling a few years later saying, 'I don't have a decent house, so can you build a house for me for your stuff?'" he said.

Nadler said he had "a pretty clear-cut agenda" going into the meeting.

The most immediate need, he said, is to ensure the safety of the books.

Second is to microfilm the numerous organizational records, letters and personal correspondence from the Jewish community from the late 19th and early 20th century.

But of all the complex and delicate political negotiations that lie ahead, Nadler's sense of urgency rises when discussing the missing Vilna Torah scrolls, perhaps the greatest symbol of survival of the Vilna Jews.

"There is really a sacred obligation to rescue them," he said.

"They are in terrible condition, but a lot of them are salvageable."

Nadler believes that maybe two or three Torahs should be given to the remaining synagogues in Vilna.

There were more than 100 at the turn of the century.

"The rest," he said, "should be given to Jewish institutions in America — synagogues founded by Jewish refugees and Holocaust survivors. They should be the beneficiary of these Torah scrolls." □