

NEWS AT A GLANCE**AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD [Part 2]
Israel's first envoy to Belgrade
in 30 years cheerful about ties**

By Ruth E. Gruber

■ Israel's chief prosecutor ordered a probe of allegations that Roni Bar-On's short-lived appointment as attorney general was linked to a secret deal with the Shas Party. The evolving controversy pits the Netanyahu government against Israel Television, which aired a report on the alleged deal. [Page 2]

■ Elyakim Rubinstein is expected to become Israel's next attorney general. [Page 2]

■ Switzerland's ambassador to Washington described in an internal strategy report the mounting crisis over alleged Swiss dealings with Nazis as a "war" that must be won, the *SonntagsZeitung* newspaper reported. Meanwhile, Switzerland's largest political party demanded the resignation of the economics minister, who at the end of his term last month as Swiss president called Jewish demands for a Holocaust compensation fund "blackmail."

■ A group of four Israeli coalition members and three opposition members signed a paper containing a joint position on what Israel's stances should be in the final-status negotiations with the Palestinians. The Prime Minister's Office stressed that the document represented the views of the signatories, not of the Israeli government.

■ Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced that the government would discuss a controversial plan to build 600 housing units in the Har Homa neighborhood in Jerusalem. The project has drawn sharp Palestinian opposition.

■ An Israeli ministerial committee agreed to allocate an additional \$39 million for infrastructure development in eastern Jerusalem. Some of the money will be used for a new police station and for salaries of hundreds of new police officers in the area.

■ The Prime Minister's Office unveiled a plan to privatize 10 to 15 state-owned companies by the end of the year. The Israeli firms to be privatized include the Bezek phone company, Israel Chemicals and Zim shipping.

BELGRADE, Yugoslavia (JTA) — The new Israeli Embassy in Belgrade is, for the time being, located in an eighth-floor suite at the end of a long corridor in the Intercontinental Hotel.

But Ambassador David Sasson, the first Israeli ambassador to Yugoslavia since Belgrade cut ties after the 1967 Six-Day War, is looking for a more permanent site.

His search for an embassy building has underscored the dramatic historical moment in which Yugoslavia — consisting today of the republics of Serbia and Montenegro — and Israel re-established full formal links.

"This may be the only place in Europe where the owner who showed me a house seriously pointed out as one of its advantages that it had a bunker underneath it," Sasson said in an interview.

Sasson took up his post in Belgrade in the midst of the mass street protests against President Slobodan Milosevic and his government that have swept Belgrade and other Serbian cities on a daily basis for more than two months.

His arrival was given extensive publicity in the Yugoslav media, and Sasson said he has been warmly welcomed by government officials.

"I feel very challenged and very lucky to come now," as the first Israeli ambassador in 30 years, he said.

"Yugoslavia is in a very interesting moment in its history," he said. "Whatever will come, I want the people here to live in peace and to develop themselves after such years of war and bloodshed."

Sasson, who served for six years as Israeli ambassador to Greece, arrived in Belgrade on Dec. 12, a year after the Dayton agreement put an end to four years of war in Bosnia and enabled the lifting of U.N. sanctions against Yugoslavia.

Belgrade and most of Serbia were not the actual site of the bloody series of wars that marked the break-up of the former Yugoslavia over the past six years, but the conflict took a heavy economic, social and psychological toll.

Broadening contacts on all levels

"Their economy is on the floor," Sasson said. "They need and want economic relations. The key point for Israelis to come to work here and invest is the privatization process and the implementation of laws necessary to protect foreign investment."

He said he wanted to broaden contacts between Yugoslavia and Israel on all levels.

"Diplomatic relations are between nations, between peoples," he said. "That's what I want to do — to tighten the relations between the Yugoslav people and the Israeli people."

Sasson said he would like to develop cultural contacts and educational exchanges, as well as joint economic projects.

"If the two people will feel closer to one another, I'll have a good feeling that I fulfilled my mission," he said.

No similar relationship with Croatia, a former Yugoslav republic, is expected anytime soon, at least as long as Croatian President Franjo Tudjman remains in office, Sasson said.

Tudjman included statements regarded as anti-Semitic in a book, and his nationalist policy is seen by many as an attempt to rehabilitate the Croatian fascist Ustashe regime that ruled Croatia as a Nazi puppet state during World War II.

"We recognize Croatia, but there will be no relations with Croatia until Tudjman takes back what he said about Jews and [stops] his anti-Semitic approach," Sasson said.

"If they maintain their policy, we won't have relations. If they take it back, we will try to speak."

Despite the previous lack of formal diplomatic relations between Yugoslavia and Israel, the two countries maintained commercial links over the years. The Yugoslav airline JAT has direct flights to Tel Aviv twice a

week, and since the end of the war in Bosnia, there has even been a boom in Israeli tourism to Yugoslavia, especially to coastal resorts in Montenegro.

"More than 5,000 Israeli tourists went to Montenegro last summer, and winter tourism is also on the rise," Sasson said.

Yugoslavia's Jews — about 3,000 people — are also closely connected with Israel. During the years of war and sanctions, many Yugoslav Jewish families sent their children to Israel for safety, and many Yugoslav Jews have relatives in Israel.

Sasson had his first formal meeting with Yugoslav Jewish representatives Jan. 16. He said he regarded the local Jewish community as family, and told them that his door was open to them at all times.

Belgrade Jews were clearly delighted with the opening of the embassy and arrival of the ambassador, but some cautioned not to expect great changes in their own situation.

"We shouldn't rely on the embassy," said one community member. "They are here for Israel, but we Jews have been here since before Israel existed and we were here during the time there were no diplomatic relations." □

Netanyahu denies allegation of secret deal on appointee

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Allegations of government misconduct have led to prompt denials from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and a call from at least one government minister for Israel Television to be shut down if the charges prove false.

As word of the alleged misconduct filled the Israeli media this week, the country's highest prosecutor ordered a police investigation into alleged corruption surrounding the short-lived appointment of Jerusalem lawyer Roni Bar-On as attorney general.

"The supreme national interest required that we uncover the true circumstances of the appointment," Edna Arbel, state attorney and acting attorney general, said Sunday after two hours of consultations with senior police officials.

Word of the police investigation came amid reports that Elyakim Rubinstein, a Jerusalem District Court judge who is widely respected in legal and political circles, had agreed to become Israel's next attorney general.

The allegations surrounding Bar-On's appointment surfaced last week, when Israel Television reported that the Shas Party, which has two ministers in the government and 10 seats in the Knesset, had promised to back the Hebron agreement when it came before the Cabinet and Parliament earlier this month in exchange for Bar-On's appointment.

According to the report, Bar-On in turn agreed to a plea bargain for Shas Knesset member Aryeh Deri, who is on trial for bribery, fraud and breach of public trust.

Netanyahu flatly denied the charges last Friday, calling for a police investigation into the allegations.

Two days after the Cabinet approved his appointment as attorney general earlier this month, Bar-On turned down the position.

Bar-On, a Likud activist, had come under intense criticism from government and legal circles, which charged that he had gotten the appointment because of his political loyalties and close association with Justice Minister Tzachi Hanegbi. Bar-On had been picked to replace Michael Ben-Yair, who announced his resignation in December.

Police investigators met Sunday with officials from Israel Television, who said they would not compromise their journalistic ethics to reveal the sources of their report.

When launching the probe, Arbel instructed police investigators to obtain the evidence on which Israel Television based its report, by court order if necessary.

The alleged deal drew sharp reactions from government ministers at last Friday's weekly Cabinet meeting.

"If the claims are not true, then the television must be closed down," Tourism Minister Moshe Katsav was quoted as saying.

Asked what should be done if the allegations were proven true, Katsav told reporters, "In that case, the government does not have the right to exist."

Deri denied in a Channel 2 Television interview any truth to the claims, adding that he has been hounded by the media for the past seven years.

Meanwhile, Hanegbi announced that Rubinstein had accepted an offer to become attorney general.

Rubinstein, 50, was made district judge two years ago.

Prior to that, he was a member of the Israeli delegation in the peace talks with Egypt, and he led the Israeli negotiating team in peace talks with Jordan. He has also served as Cabinet secretary.

Netanyahu and Hanegbi asked Rubinstein last Friday to take the position. He requested a few days to think it over, and later accepted.

His nomination was expected to be brought before the Cabinet this week. □

Israel approves expansion of Jordan Valley settlement

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel has approved the construction of 60 new housing units in a Jewish settlement in the Jordan Valley.

The move, which sparked criticism from Palestinian officials, came last week only days after Israel turned over most of the West Bank town of Hebron to self-rule.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu defended his government's approval of the private construction project in Ma'aleh Ephraim.

He added that Israel planned to continue expanding Jewish settlements in the West Bank.

"I do not think that the Oslo agreements or the latest agreement [regarding Hebron] rule out continuation of construction," he said. "We've always said this. There is no change."

The Israeli government's earlier decision to lift a freeze on building in existing Jewish settlements has drawn criticism from Arab countries as well as from the United States.

In Hebron meanwhile, Israeli and Palestinian security forces have increased their number of joint patrols from two to four.

The two sides were expected to add more joint patrols in the coming days.

In a related development, Israeli officials charged that a large number of stolen Israeli weapons had fallen into the hands of the Palestinian police.

Netanyahu said last week that a number of stolen Israel Defense Force rifles had been confiscated from the Palestinian police, but he did not say whether the rifles had been returned to Israel.

On Jan. 19, Israel suspended the distribution of rifles to Palestinian police in Hebron after discovering that some Palestinian security officers had Galil rifles, an Israeli assault weapon. An IDF source was quoted as saying that the weapons had been confiscated by the Palestinian Authority from Hamas and Islamic Jihad militants and then turned over to the Palestinian police. □

French Supreme Court lifts last obstacle to Papon trial

By Lee Yanowitch

PARIS (JTA) — France's Supreme Court has ruled that a former Cabinet minister should stand trial on charges of crimes against humanity.

An appeals court ruled in September that Maurice Papon, 86, should face trial for ordering the deportation of 1,690 Jews, 223 of them children, to Nazi death camps when he was secretary general of the Bordeaux region's local government during Germany's wartime occupation of France.

Papon appealed the ruling to the Supreme Court, which last week quashed his attempts to avoid trial for his activities during France's wartime Vichy regime.

The trial date is scheduled to be announced next month. The trial, expected to take place in the fall, will give the French people an exhaustive examination of the Vichy government's role during the Holocaust.

CRIF, the umbrella group of secular French Jewish organizations, applauded the Jan. 23 Supreme Court ruling, which capped more than 15 years of efforts to bring Papon to trial.

"For the first time, the workings of the administrative machine under [Vichy leader] Philippe Petain, which collaborated in sending Jewish men, women and children to the concentration camps, will be analyzed before a French court," CRIF said in a statement.

Legal proceedings against Papon, which were first undertaken in 1981, were delayed by successive French governments in the hope that Papon would die before a trial took place that would recall a period many French people would rather forget.

Michel Slitinsky, a French Jew who first shed light on Papon's wartime record, praised the "courageous magistrates" who ruled that Papon should be brought to justice.

"It will have taken four years to rid ourselves of the German occupiers, and 15 to get to the bottom of his character," Slitinsky said.

In its ruling, the Supreme Court said Papon knew that "the arrest and deportation of Jews to the east would inevitably lead them to death," adding that his office always "sought to ensure maximum efficiency in carrying out anti-Jewish measures."

'Displayed unwarranted zeal'

The court also said Papon often displayed unwarranted zeal by providing Nazi authorities with details about French Jews before he was asked for the information.

The charges against Papon include being an accomplice to kidnapping and murder, carrying out arbitrary arrests and perpetrating inhuman acts.

Papon has denied the charges against him, saying that he used his position in the Resistance to save Jews. Papon reportedly joined the Resistance movement near the end of 1943.

After the liberation, Papon went on to an illustrious postwar career, serving as police chief of Paris between 1958 and 1967, then as budget minister in the French Cabinet during the 1970s.

Minutes after the ruling was announced, Papon issued a statement denouncing the decision as "scandalous."

He also compared himself to Capt. Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish officer who was falsely convicted of spying for Germany in a controversial case that sparked a wave of anti-Semitism in France a century ago.

Saying he "won't let my throat be slit," Papon added in the statement that he was the victim of a political

vendetta by Communists, the leftist lobby and "foreign institutions who want to implicate France in the genocide."

He will be the second and probably the last Frenchman ever to face trial for crimes against humanity.

A lower-ranking collaborationist, Lyon militia chief Paul Touvier, was jailed for life in 1994. He died in prison in July at 81. Rene Bousquet, Vichy's national police chief and Papon's superior, was killed by a deranged gunman in 1993 on the eve of his war crimes trial. □

Accused war criminal dies on first day of proceedings

By Bill Gladstone

TORONTO (JTA) — A 90-year-old British Columbia resident accused of rounding up Jews for mass extermination in his native Lithuania during World War II has died.

He passed away of natural causes on the first day of legal proceedings related to the government's attempt to deport him.

The federal Immigration Department had accused Antanas Kenstavicius of entering Canada illegally after World War II and of telling lies about his past to gain permanent-residency status.

As chief of police in Lithuania during the war, he was alleged to have collaborated with the Nazis in rounding up more than 5,000 Lithuanian Jews and marching them to a cemetery where German soldiers shot them.

Later, he allegedly fled Lithuania for Germany and joined the German army.

In 1949, a year after he arrived in Halifax, Nova Scotia, the Canadian Jewish Congress informed the authorities of the allegations against him.

"It took 47 years to bring him into a courtroom," said Bernie Farber, the CJC's national director of community relations. "This proves what we've been saying all along — that all of the alleged Nazi war criminals in Canada will die peacefully in their beds before seeing justice, if this slow pace of justice continues."

Farber and other community officials have made renewed requests to the federal Justice Department to name four other alleged war criminals on the department's short list for deportation actions.

"If the government names them, at least the potential for them facing some justice remains," Farber said.

Canadian authorities have come under criticism in recent weeks for what Jewish leaders here say is a lack of aggressiveness in investigating and prosecuting suspected war criminals.

Earlier this month, Canadian Jewish leaders reacted with indignation to reports that some 300 German veterans of World War II who now reside in Canada are receiving pensions from the German government.

Kenstavicius, who was not a Canadian citizen, died in a hospital in Hope, a town east of Vancouver where he and his wife had lived for more than 40 years.

In related news, the Justice Department has finished arguments in a Toronto courtroom in its bid to expel Konrad Kalejs, an 83-year-old Latvian who allegedly participated in the mass killings of Jews, Communists and Red Army personnel in a Latvian forest in 1941.

The defense is scheduled to begin its response this week. The hearing, which has been beset with delays, has gone on for almost a year.

Kalejs lived in Australia after the war and then moved to the United States, from which he was deported in 1988. Kalejs is suffering from cancer and a heart condition, and was under heavy medication during the proceedings. □

Berlin Holocaust memorial still surrounded by debate*By Daniel Dagan*

BONN (JTA) — A Berlin municipal official has added new heat to the ongoing controversy about a planned Holocaust memorial in Berlin.

Peter Radunski, an official responsible for cultural affairs, told a recent colloquium on the memorial that the budget for the monument would not be increased and that the cornerstone would be laid no later than Jan. 27, the 52nd anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz.

Radunski's statement caused an uproar among the 100 scholars, historians, architects and politicians attending the colloquium, some of whom cried foul, saying that they were being left out of the decision-making process.

The memorial is to be erected near the Brandenburg Gate, in the center of the capital.

But it has been held up as debate continues over the monument's design as well as over who it will commemorate, only Jews or victims of Nazi terror in general.

City officials and federal authorities, as well as a private advocacy group, have been overseeing the project.

A design initially adopted by the organizers called for putting a huge, black concrete plate on the site, on which all known names of the Jewish victims of the Nazis would be engraved. But the idea of the plate, which critics said could be as big as a soccer field, was dropped after protests by Chancellor Helmut Kohl and others, who called the project "megalomania."

Now, the organizers say, the memorial should be chosen from the other nine proposals that won awards in a design competition. One proposal calls for building a bus station at the memorial site, with tickets sold and services offered to take visitors to the various concentration and death camps in Europe. Many participants at the colloquium disagreed, and called for a new design competition.

Two more colloquiums on the Berlin memorial have been set for February and April.

Meanwhile, the German media is engaged in a new soul-searching effort to deal with the past.

The ZDF, Germany's second public television channel, this month aired a six-part documentary titled "Hitler's Helpers." It featured hours of motion pictures taken by Third Reich official photographer Heinrich Hoffmann and others, showing the main Nazi figures who stood behind Adolf Hitler's rise to power and his extermination program. The channel also has been selling a book designed to help viewers understand the Nazi regime.

In another soul-searching piece, historian Ulrich Herbert of the University of Freiburg wrote in *Die Zeit* that after World War II, Germany willingly absorbed into its newly created democratic system a large number of individuals who had held major positions under Hitler.

As early as 1946, a policy of forgiveness was pursued, with the church serving as an outspoken voice against the social isolation of former Nazi officials, Herbert wrote. This attitude was adopted by Germany's first postwar chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, who believed that it was essential for Germany to use the skills and experience of former Nazis to rebuild the country, Herbert wrote. □

Czech Jewish groups get role in evolving ties with Germany*By Randi Druzin*

PRAGUE (JTA) — The Czech-German reconciliation pact that was signed last week has been denounced by several organizations on the grounds that it all but pardons crimes committed by Nazi Germany on Czech soil.

But Jewish opposition to the declaration subsided

last Friday, when Czech Foreign Minister Josef Zieleniec granted Czech Jewish groups representation on the board of the Czech-German Fund for the Future, which is being created to promote joint projects.

After meeting with the Jewish groups, Zieleniec announced that they had expressed support for the Czech-German declaration as a "document which lays a new basis for conflict-free cooperation between Czechs and Germans."

The pact, which was negotiated for almost two years, is intended to ease long-standing tensions rooted in Germany's wartime occupation of Czech lands and the subsequent deportation of Sudeten Germans from postwar Czechoslovakia.

German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and Czech Premier Vaclav Klaus signed the declaration at a Jan. 21 ceremony held at Liechtenstein Palace here in the Czech capital. Each of the leaders expressed hope that the pact would lead to improved bilateral relations.

When the contents of the document were leaked to the media in December, the Federation of Czech Jewish Communities and the Czech Freedom Fighters Association, an umbrella organization for former resistance fighters and political prisoners, complained that Germany did not comment on the Holocaust in the declaration but simply "regrets the suffering and iniquities inflicted on the Czech people."

The two groups also complained that the document did not call for any compensation to individual Czech victims of Nazism.

They also denounced as insufficient the proposed Fund for the Future, founded to finance "projects of common interest" to both countries.

On the day of the signing, Czech Freedom Fighters Chairman Jakub Cermin put his cautious support behind the declaration, claiming that Czechs and Germans "must start from somewhere" on the road to reconciliation.

Opposition to the pact meanwhile continues from both ends of the political spectrum.

During the signing ceremony, members of the far-right Republican Party as well as the Communist Party stood within earshot of the dignitaries chanting, "Shame" and "Gestapo."

The Communists have denounced the document as "unacceptable," claiming that it puts Czechoslovakia's postwar deportation of ethnic Germans on the same level as Nazi crimes.

The groups who remain opposed to the declaration are launching petitions against it, hoping to discourage members of the Czech Parliament from ratifying the document. □

Chief Israeli negotiator resigns*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Dan Shomron has announced his resignation as the chief Israeli negotiator with the Palestinians.

The former Israel Defense Force chief of staff said Jan. 21 that he had wanted to serve in the post until a Hebron agreement was signed.

At a closed-door ceremony Jan. 17 in Jerusalem, Shomron and chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat officially signed a long-delayed agreement for the redeployment of Israeli troops from most of Hebron, capping more than three months of often tortuous negotiations.

Days earlier, Shomron and Erekat put their initials on the accord after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat approved its terms at a late-night summit on the border between Israel and the Gaza Strip. □