



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ If there is goodwill on the part of Syria, Israel and Syria could "easily find the necessary bridge of words" to resume negotiations, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told American Jewish leaders in a satellite broadcast. He also said he was "taking pains to listen" to American Jewish concerns about proposed legislation about conversion.

■ Some Likud members of the Knesset said they would consider a withdrawal on the Golan Heights in exchange for peace. [Page 4]

■ A Hamas leader detained in the United States withdrew his appeal of an Israeli extradition request. [Page 4]

■ French Jewish leaders expressed astonishment at revelations that French national museums failed to seek the rightful owners of precious works of art looted from Jews during World War II. [Page 2]

■ Florida Gov. Lawton Chiles vowed to veto any school prayer bill that hits his desk before he leaves office in two years. Lawmakers have promised a push to override Chiles' veto of a school prayer bill the state Legislature passed last year. But prayer advocates appear to be short of the two-thirds necessary to override.

■ Israel sent a second plane of supplies to Rwanda for its refugee population. The Israeli assistance was coordinated with the needs of Rwanda based on requests of the Kigali government in its contacts with international organizations.

■ A Polish priest made another anti-Semitic sermon in his Gdansk church, less than a week after he was formally charged with slandering Jews for his remarks in an earlier sermon, Polish media reported. Father Henryk Jankowski criticized the Polish government for giving in to the demands of Jews and the relatives of Holocaust victims.

■ The Dutch Parliament is set to reopen its probe into the crash of an El Al airplane four years ago over Amsterdam in the wake of reports of a rise of birth defects and cancer cases in the area.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Sharansky's visit to Moscow filled with personal emotion

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — At the entrance to Moscow's central synagogue, two men surrounded by dozens of cameras embraced one another.

Lev Mishkin, a 74-year-old Moscow Jew, had come to the synagogue to greet the most famous former Soviet Jewish dissident who returned this week to Russia as a senior Israeli minister, 11 years after his release from the gulag. Mishkin remembers when Natan Sharansky, then known as Anatoly, was a young activist in the underground Jewish movement in Moscow.

"Sharansky suffered for us Soviet Jews. He was the first to raise his voice to defend our rights," said Mishkin, his eyes full of tears.

Sharansky, now Israel's minister of industry and trade, came to Moscow for the first time since he was arrested by the KGB here in 1977.

Apart from the trip's official goal of improving trade between his adopted country and his native land, the visit was full of deep personal emotions for the man who started his struggle for human rights and freedom of emigration in 1973 and today can see the fruit of those efforts.

Sharansky says he came to Russia wearing more than one hat — as a minister, as a Jewish activist and as a former dissident and defender of human rights.

"I have come back to a country where I have spent many years of my life, whose language I know, whose culture I share," said Sharansky, wearing a traditional Russian fur hat, upon his arrival here Monday.

Sharansky came with his wife, Avital, and mother, Ida Milgrom. Both women led an intense international campaign to win his release from Soviet imprisonment. He was swapped for several Soviet spies in a 1986 prisoner exchange with the West.

Unlike many of his fellow dissidents and refuseniks, who eventually left Russia and then paid visits to their native country shortly after the fall of communism, Sharansky waited until he was given a chance to return to Moscow as a high-ranking Israeli official. Refuseniks were Soviet Jews unable to emigrate.

But there was an occasion, back in 1989, when Sharansky did want to return, after the death of his friend Andrei Sakharov, the leader of the Soviet dissident movement and Nobel laureate.

"Then I was denied permission to come for [Sakharov's] funeral because I was still considered a spy in the Soviet Union," Sharansky said.

Sharansky was sentenced in 1977 to 13 years in jail on charges of treason and espionage for the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. He was fully exonerated by the Russian authorities only five years ago.

On his first day in Russia, Sharansky visited his father's grave, which he said he had never seen because his father died when he was in prison.

'These are different people'

Sharansky appeared happy to be in the city of his youth, to see the changes that had occurred in Russia since he immigrated to Israel after his release.

"The same streets, the same snow, but when you talk to people, you can see that these are different people, people without that fear, without self-censorship, as it used to be years ago," Sharansky said.

Today people even "smile differently" on the streets of the Russian capital, he added.

Accompanied by his wife, Sharansky visited sites in the Russian capital associated with his Jewish and human rights activities in the 1970s.

Avital herself had not visited Russia since she was granted permission 23 years ago to leave for Israel without her husband.

On Tuesday, the Sharanskys paid homage at Sakharov's grave and visited the Sakharov museum, which is devoted to human rights activities in the Soviet Union, including those of Sharansky himself.

It was Sakharov's personal example that led Sharansky and a number of intellectuals of his generation to join the ranks of human rights activists.

Sakharov, also known as the father of the Soviet hydrogen bomb, showed that "even in the most difficult situation you can live in accordance

with your conscience, you can say things you believe in, you can display solidarity with those who suffer," Sharansky said.

During his four-day visit, Sharansky was scheduled to meet with the Jewish community and to visit the former KGB Lefortovo prison, where he spent what he describes as "some of the most interesting days" in his life before being shipped to a northern labor camp. He said he also wanted to visit that camp in the Ural Mountains but was denied permission because of some "technical difficulty."

Meanwhile, accompanied by dozens of reporters, Sharansky led a bus tour of 1970s dissident Moscow.

The sites included the U.S. Embassy, Pushkin Square, where the first demonstration of Soviet Jews took place in 1973, and the Central Telegraph building, where the dissidents practiced silent indoor demonstrations.

The bus also passed the infamous KGB building on Lubyanka Square, where many dissidents had been interrogated, and the former office building of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, where Sharansky and his colleagues had brought human rights petitions.

And most importantly — the Choral Synagogue, which served as a magnet for all Jewish activities during the Soviet era. It was outside the synagogue where Sharansky first met his future wife, Avital, about 25 years ago.

The retired Moscow Jew who came to the synagogue Tuesday for the purpose of seeing Sharansky was alone in his recognition of the former dissident.

"The younger generation doesn't know who Sharansky was," Mishkin said. "And those who knew had already left the country."

Teen-agers at a Moscow Jewish day school proved that Mishkin was right. "I hadn't heard [Sharansky's] name until it was announced he would come to our school," said Natasha, a 16-year-old high school student. Sharansky was scheduled to visit the school during his trip.

The official part of the visit included meetings with a few members of the Russian Cabinet and the mayor of Moscow and participation in an Israeli-Russian seminar on economic cooperation. □

French Jews shocked to learn museums hold Nazi-looted art

By Lee Yanowitch

PARIS (JTA) — French Jewish community leaders expressed astonishment at revelations published this week that French national museums failed to seek the rightful owners of nearly 2,000 works of art looted from Jews during World War II.

The French daily newspaper *Le Monde* on Monday published excerpts of a confidential report by France's public spending watchdog, the *Cour des Comptes*, indicating that for more than 50 years, officials of state-run museums had made little or no effort to return paintings and sculptures seized from Jews during the Nazi occupation of France.

"It's shocking," said Emmanuel Weintraub, vice president of CRIF, the umbrella group of secular French Jewish organizations.

"I'm convinced that in most cases, people preferred not to open a Pandora's box. They knew the deportees weren't going to return, so they figured what was left belonged to them."

Serge Cwajgenbaum, secretary general of the European Jewish Congress, said the museums carried out a "deliberate and political act to hide the origins of these works and not to try to return them to their owners."

The revelations in *Le Monde* came just days after

Prime Minister Alain Juppe, addressing Jewish leaders, announced that he would name a commission to investigate the extent of seizures of Jewish property by the Nazis and by France's collaborationist Vichy government.

Calling it a "national duty," Juppe said the commission could be in place within a week.

Weintraub praised the initiative, but said that "it's not a question of monetary compensation."

"It's a matter of shedding light on dark and particularly unpleasant corners of the Second World War," he said.

He said the revelations about the works of art were "just the tip of the iceberg," adding that he hoped that the government probe would also look into unopened archives from the wartime Office of Jewish Affairs.

The archives, he said, would help trace the ownership of other looted Jewish property that included apartments, businesses, jewels and bank accounts.

The decision to form an investigative commission comes amid calls from Jewish groups for several European countries to shed light on their wartime dealings with Nazi Germany. Switzerland and Sweden, which were neutral during the war, have come under mounting charges that they profited from gold and other assets seized from Jews during the Holocaust.

Last week, in the wake of increasing pressure from Jewish groups and American legislators, the Swiss government announced that it would help establish a fund to begin compensating Holocaust victims and their heirs whose assets were deposited into numbered Swiss bank accounts during the war years.

Similar allegations have also been directed at French institutions. In September, the Paris municipality froze all sales of city-owned apartments after revelations that some of them had been seized from Jews deported to concentration camps or fleeing persecution.

Jewish leaders initially welcomed Juppe's announcement that an investigation would be launched, but they were more subdued after the *Le Monde* article was published.

The *Cour des Comptes*, an agency not unlike the U.S. General Accounting Office, said in its report that several museums were involved, but that the Louvre was in possession of most of the works — 1,878 — while the *Musee d'Orsay*, also located in Paris, had 85.

The works included paintings by impressionists Claude Monet, Alfred Sisley, Pierre Auguste Renoir and Paul Gauguin as well as sculptures by Auguste Rodin.

Museums tried to minimize issue

"Under the circumstances, it would be impossible not to report that the state, and in particular the management of the *Musees de France*, will have failed in their obligation to publicize the works" so that they could be reclaimed by their original owners, the agency said.

The affair "illustrates how a troubling situation was able to perpetuate itself for 50 years without anyone, foremost the head of the *Musees de France*, being moved," it said.

Le Monde said the *Cour des Comptes* sent its report to the head office of the *Musees de France*, as well as to the Justice, Culture and Budget ministries on Jan. 22.

According to *Le Monde*, when the *Cour des Comptes* queried the museums, all but the curator of the *Musee d'Orsay* tried to minimize the importance of the works in their possession.

The treasures, most of which had belonged to Jewish art collectors, were returned to France from Germany at the end of the war and entrusted to state museums in 1949 for safekeeping until their owners or heirs could be located. □

FOCUS ON ISSUES

50 U.S. Reform rabbis press Netanyahu on conversion bill

By Michele Chabin

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Although it is too early to tell whether a whirlwind visit to Israel will have an impact on the outcome of pending conversion legislation, a delegation of Reform rabbis in America say the visit was not in vain.

The 50 rabbis came to Israel this week to lobby against a bill, which, if passed, would affirm the Chief Rabbinate's control over all conversions to Judaism in Israel and thereby delegitimize non-Orthodox conversions.

Welcomed by numerous governmental officials, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the delegation received "a great deal of respect," said Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch, executive director of the Association of Reform Zionists of America.

Hirsch said the half-hour meeting, the first since Netanyahu came to power, was "in itself significant."

While acknowledging that no one came "expecting to change things overnight," Rabbi Robert Orkand of Temple Israel in Westport, Conn., agreed that the meeting with Netanyahu was time well spent.

The battle over who has the legal right to perform conversions in Israel is part of a larger campaign by Reform and Conservative Jews to win recognition for their movements in Israel.

"We tried to explain that Israel is the only democracy in the world that doesn't afford its citizens the right of free expression," said Orkand.

"The fact that a Reform Jew can't be married or undergo conversion by his or her rabbi is terribly upsetting."

Orkand added, "Whether we convinced the prime minister, who can say? But I think he heard us."

Bobby Brown, the prime minister's adviser on Diaspora affairs, concurred that the meeting with the Reform rabbis went well.

"This was an open discussion," he said.

In the works for months

"The rabbis understood the depth of the problem the prime minister is facing," said Brown, referring to Netanyahu's political quandary of trying to please both his Orthodox coalition partners and American Jews.

"At the same time, the prime minister understood how deeply the rabbis felt about this issue and how the conversion bill could affect the rabbis and their communities back home."

The Reform lobbying effort came as the Cabinet is nearing action on the so-called "Rabbinical Court Conversion Bill," which has been in the works for months.

Once the Cabinet approves the measure, it will go to the Knesset.

The bill aims to plug a hole in Israel's Orthodox monopoly over religious affairs.

Israel's Supreme Court ruled in late 1995 that there was no legal reason why non-Orthodox conversions should not be recognized in Israel.

However, the court did not explicitly recognize such conversions, saying that it would be up to the Knesset to pass the appropriate legislation.

Orthodox parties that joined the Netanyahu government have been pressing for legislation that would, in effect, delegitimize non-Orthodox conversions both in Israel and abroad.

But Netanyahu himself has pledged to American Jewish groups that while he would support legislation that affirms the Orthodox control over conversions in Israel, he

would not back a measure that alters Israeli recognition of non-Orthodox conversions performed in the Diaspora.

The current proposal apparently does not contain any references to conversions abroad.

However, the Reform rabbis expressed fears that a provision regarding conversions outside Israel might be introduced at a later date.

Even if the law does not directly affect conversions outside Israel, opponents say, it would delegitimize millions of non-Orthodox Jews both in Israel and the Diaspora.

"I think there is a growing realization in the government of the potentially catastrophic consequences if the bill passes," said Hirsch.

When asked to define "catastrophic consequences," Hirsch replied, "Our official position will be to continue our support for Israel, and funding on behalf of Israel."

However, Hirsch warned that unless non-Orthodox Jews receive legal recognition of their rabbis and institutions in Israel, non-Orthodox Jews in the Diaspora might decide to "disengage" from the Jewish state.

"Israel's leadership must understand that if 80 percent of American Jews are not Orthodox, then at least 80 percent of federation members are not Orthodox," he said.

Hirsch said the American Jewish leadership "is beginning to be very troubled by what it sees."

Last November, the Council of Jewish Federations called on the Israeli government not to pass or change any legislation that "would change the current situation regarding recognition of conversions."

Not all American Jews, and certainly not Orthodox Jews, share the concerns voiced by the Reform rabbinical delegation.

American Orthodox groups have made clear their support of new conversion legislation.

But, according to Hirsch, there is a growing feeling in the United States that Israel is saying: "We'll take your money, your political support, the foreign aid you helped produce, but don't even think of bringing your religious sensibilities here."

During their visit, the American rabbis put their religious views into practice.

Tones strong and clear

Although a planned conversion of a handful of people in the Mediterranean Sea was postponed due to bad weather, the delegates successfully held a joint male/female morning service in the plaza just behind the Western Wall.

Donning prayer shawls, and in some cases tefillin, the rabbis' service was a historic event: Rather than huddle together at the back of the plaza as many non-Orthodox groups do, voices hushed for fear of arousing the ire of Orthodox worshipers, the rabbis stood in a central location, their tones strong and clear.

Protected by half a dozen police, the group finished the service without incident.

The only disturbance — by four fervently religious men who shouted at the group — occurred after the service.

The police intervened immediately.

Speaking to reporters after the service, her tefillin straps still tied around her arm, Rabbi Jo David said, "This was the most wonderful spiritual experience I've ever had at the Wall."

David, the rabbi of Union Reform Temple in Freeport, N.Y., said this was the first time in Israel that she was able to pray as she wanted.

"Until now, I never realized why I didn't feel the way I was supposed to. Today it all came together." □

Some Likud Knesset members may back withdrawal on Golan*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Several Likud Knesset members say they would consider an Israeli withdrawal on the Golan Heights in exchange for peace with Syria.

The parliamentarians, some of them considered hawks, suggested this week that Israeli flexibility regarding the Golan could provide leverage to make fewer concessions to the Palestinians in upcoming negotiations regarding the West Bank.

Likud Knesset member Reuven Rivlin, who voted against the Hebron agreement in the recent Knesset decision, told Israel Radio that he would support a Golan withdrawal if it would enable Israel to retain large portions of the West Bank. Rivlin proposed that Israel could consider leasing the Golan from Syria for a period of time necessary to prove that a peace with Damascus would hold.

Likud parliamentarians Meir Sheehrit and Yehuda Lankri — whose party platform describes the Golan as essential to Israel's security — said Tuesday that they would back a Golan withdrawal if it furthered peace.

Golan residents expressed shock at the remarks.

Golan regional council head Yehuda Wallman said Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had clearly stated before and after the elections in May that two principles were essential to Israel's future: no concessions on the Golan and no concessions on Jerusalem.

The Knesset members' remarks came after Netanyahu said he was optimistic that talks with Syria, suspended after a wave of suicide bombings in Israel, would resume soon. "There are contacts through the United States, and efforts by the United States, to renew the talks," he said Monday during a tour of Haifa. □

Extradition of Hamas leader to Israel moves a step closer*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A top Hamas official may be extradited from the United States to Israel within a few weeks, according to Israeli media reports.

The U.S. State Department said Tuesday that Musa Abu Marzook intends to withdraw his appeal against an Israeli extradition request.

American officials arrested Marzook in July 1995 at a New York airport as he tried to enter the United States, where he had been living for several years. Israel issued the extradition request that year, charging that Marzook, as head of the political bureau of Hamas, had overseen terrorist acts in Israel and the territories.

A U.S. federal judge ruled in May that Marzook could be extradited because there was cause to believe that he was linked to a Hamas conspiracy to commit violence. That ruling was upheld in October and was appealed by Marzook, who said he had no ties to Hamas' armed wing and that he was not guilty of any extraditable offenses.

U.S. prosecutors surprised Israeli officials when they informed them this week of Marzook's decision to stop appealing the extradition request, it was reported. □

U.S. report says Palestinians mostly complied with pledges*By Matthew Dorf*

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The Palestinian Authority has, "on the whole," complied with its commitments made to Israel, according to a recent State Department report.

The certification, required under U.S. law, allows

aid to and diplomatic contact with Yasser Arafat's government. The report, issued semi-annually for the past three years, is considered pro forma, because without passing muster, the Palestinians would not be able to receive U.S. aid. U.S. officials have deemed the \$500 million pledge in aid, spread over five years, essential to the ongoing peace process between Israel and the Palestinians.

The report details areas in which the Palestinian Authority has complied with its commitments to Israel, including renunciation of terrorism and confiscation of weapons. The report, which also summarizes the various commitments the Palestinians have made, includes a chronology of incidents of violence and terrorism committed by Palestinians.

The Palestine Liberation Organization and the Palestinian Authority "have — on the whole — taken steps to carry out their commitments and otherwise have taken the steps called for in" U.S. law, the report states.

Among the recommendations in the 13-page report, the State Department said the Palestinian Authority "could institute a more effective process of command and control to ensure that there will be no repetition of the September 1996 confrontations between the Palestinian police and the Israel Defense Forces."

That violence, which erupted after Israel opened a new entrance to a Jerusalem tunnel, deteriorated into armed clashes, which left 76 Israelis and Palestinians dead.

The report, which has drawn criticism from opponents of the Oslo peace process, also reflects new agreements between the parties.

One of the more noteworthy additions revolves around the long-controversial Palestinian Covenant.

The U.S. government and the former Israeli government, led by Shimon Peres, deemed the April 24, 1996, vote of the Palestine National Council to amend the covenant as a fulfillment of its commitment on the issue.

However, the current Israeli government believes that the PNC only deleted unspecified sections of the covenant calling for the destruction of Israel and needs to write new portions, as they voted to do last April.

The Israeli concern, which is reflected in the recent deal on Hebron, is also included in the State Department report: "The P.A. reaffirmed the commitment to Israel to complete the process of revising the covenant" as part of the recent Hebron accords, the report states.

This addition means that once again, the covenant issue is in the spotlight, as the State Department watches for compliance.

ZOA says to withhold aid

The report also echoes a previous U.S. call to Italy to seek custody of Abu Abbas, the mastermind of the 1985 Achille Lauro hijacking, who is believed to have been in Gaza for nearly a year. An Italian court, in absentia, sentenced Abbas to life in prison.

On the same day that the State Department released its report certifying compliance, the Zionist Organization of America released two statements calling on the United States to withhold aid to the Palestinian Authority.

Citing reports that Arafat posted more Palestinian police than allowed under the Hebron accords and that they carried banned weapons, ZOA President Morton Klein called for the Clinton administration to "use its \$500 million aid package to the PLO as leverage to force the PLO to cease such anti-peace behavior."

Klein, who has led the charge against U.S. aid to the Palestinians, immediately condemned the State Department. "This State Department report reads like an attorney's brief for the PLO, ignoring or whitewashing the mountain of evidence proving that the PLO is guilty of constant violation and anti-peace behavior," he said. □