



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ The nominating committee of the Jewish National Fund of America chose by acclamation Ronald S. Lauder to serve as the organization's next president. The JNF board is scheduled to meet Feb. 10 to vote on the nomination.

■ Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met with Pope John Paul II in the Vatican and invited the pontiff to visit Israel. The pope expressed interest in visiting Israel before the year 2000, but said he would first like to see more progress in the peace process. [Page 3]

■ Lawyers for a man accused of violating the rights of a Jewish scholar slain in Brooklyn more than five years ago say police substituted a pair of baggy jeans with bloodstains for the ones their client was wearing the night prosecutors claim he knifed Yankel Rosenbaum. Lemrick Nelson Jr., 21, who is on currently on trial, was acquitted of the Crown Heights murder in a 1992 trial.

■ The United States and Russia agreed to convene the steering committee for the multilateral peace talks next month in Moscow. The talks, which address regional issues, are part of the framework established at the Madrid conference in 1991.

■ A senior Palestinian official acknowledged that a Palestinian detainee was tortured during interrogation before he died in a Nablus hospital. The Palestinian Authority continued to investigate the death of Yusuf Ismail Al-Baba, a real estate agent who had been accused of fraud.

■ Swiss banks responded to a threatened boycott by New York politicians with assurances that Switzerland is working fast to set up a fund for Holocaust victims. [Page 3]

■ The Italian government has five trunks of gold and valuables apparently taken from Jewish victims of the Nazis in World War II, Italian media reported. The trunks are in a storage vault of the Treasury Ministry and were located after an inquiry by the Jewish community of Trieste.

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

Sarajevo Jewish community rebuilding after Bosnia war

By Michele Chabin

SARAJEVO, Bosnia (JTA) — It is a bitterly cold day, but the Jewish Community Center of Sarajevo exudes a warm glow.

Little more than a year after the U.S.-brokered Dayton agreement led to a cease-fire between Serbs and Muslims in this war-ravaged country, the community center and the people who run it still play a vital role in the day-to-day lives of many Sarajevo residents, Jews and non-Jews alike.

Home to La Benevolencija, a non-sectarian humanitarian organization organized and operated by the Jewish community, the center remains what it has been since the war's start in 1992 — a lifeline for the hungry, the homeless, the ones in need of hope.

In a city with thousands upon thousands of refugees, where virtually every building has sustained mortar damage and the water supply operates only seven hours a day, the community's pharmacy, clinic and food kitchen are busier than ever.

On a recent day, as the temperature dipped well below freezing, young and old lined up for free medications, many of which cannot be found elsewhere in the city.

The same lines can be found at the free outpatient clinic, the soup kitchen and the warehouse, which once a month hands out small packages filled with food and other necessities.

Those who are too sick or old to leave their homes receive regular visits from community members.

Yet it is in the center itself, run down from years of use, that the word "community" takes on its true meaning.

Thick with cigarette smoke and the smell of pasta, the center is a noisy, lively place with a clear sense of purpose.

During holidays such as Passover, when many of the remaining 600 members of Sarajevo's Jewish community gather, there is barely enough room to move around.

With the exception of 20 or 30 youngsters, who attend Sunday school classes and occasional parties, the people who come to the center are at least in their 50s.

"The children and most of the very old were evacuated by the Joint (the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee) during the first year of the war, and most of them have started new lives in Croatia, Serbia, Israel and a dozen other places," says Jacob Finci, president of both the Jewish community and La Benevolencija.

'A funny thing happened'

Of the 1,200 community members who lived in the city prior to the war, Finci says, "exactly 1,003 left."

"But then a funny thing happened: About 300 people who never before defined themselves as Jewish, but who had the documents to prove they had at least a Jewish grandparent, suddenly declared themselves to us," he says.

"This strengthened the community at the very time that it was faltering."

Since the war ended in late 1995, dozens of original community members have returned, usually without their children. Hundreds more might return if their apartments, now occupied by refugees, are eventually vacated.

Although the Jews that stayed behind during three hellish years of war suffered alongside their predominantly Muslim neighbors, they were never singled out, says Igor Gaon, who is the country's sole Jewish parliamentarian.

"The Jewish community has been here for 500 years, since the expulsion from Spain, and we have never experienced anti-Semitism from our Bosnian neighbors," Gaon says. "We have always mixed with others in Bosnia and Sarajevo, and we have married into each other's families."

During World War II, Gaon says, "our neighbors, including many Muslims, tried to save us from the Germans."

"Back then, there were 12,000 Jews, but only 1,500 returned after the

war," Gaon says, adding that "most died in the Holocaust."

Those Jews who returned to Sarajevo enjoyed a special status, he says.

"The Bosnians were and are aware of how we Jews suffered during the Second World War. They see us as a neutral party, and during this war all three sides respected us.

"It's not a coincidence that none of our synagogues were badly damaged by the shelling."

Yehiel Bar-Chaim, the JDC's director for the former Yugoslavia, believes that it is this carefully guarded neutrality that enabled Sarajevo's tiny Jewish community to serve as a humanitarian bridge during the darkest days of the civil war.

Recalling how La Benevolencija — with funding from the JDC, the London-based World Jewish Relief and other sources — evacuated and assisted large numbers of non-Jews during the war, Bar-Chaim says, "There is a naturalness of relations between Jews and the rest of society here that is virtually incomprehensible to outsiders."

Fears about Islamic fundamentalism

He chooses the community's Sunday school, which was inaugurated during the heaviest days of shelling, as an example.

"Outside of Sarajevo, where could you find a Sunday school with as many non-Jewish kids as Jewish ones? The Jewish kids found a warm environment, a refuge from the war, and they wanted to share it with their friends.

"They would come and say, 'Can I bring my best friend?' No one even thought to say no."

Whether the Jews' special place in Bosnian society will continue is unclear.

Speaking in hushed tones, a few community members say they fear an eventual rise in Islamic fundamentalism.

Although Sarajevo remains a largely secular city, more women are adopting Islamic dress, and several new mosques have opened recently.

Most disturbing, say Jewish community members, is that Iran is playing an increasingly central role in everyday affairs, contributing millions of dollars to aid refugees and rebuild the city.

Some Jews, however, fear that their own universalist policies, and not Islamic fundamentalism, could spell the end of Jewish life in the city.

"I personally think that the future of my children may not be here. That will be up to them," says Finci, whose sons now reside in Israel.

Finci, whose Muslim-born wife converted to Judaism, says up to 90 percent of Sarajevo's Jews have intermarried. Few of the non-Jewish spouses opt for conversion.

Although the community has no rabbi, and the overwhelming majority of Jews lead a secular lifestyle, Finci says that "we are not assimilated, just integrated."

"If we were assimilated, we would consider ourselves Bosnians, not Jews," he says. "We are Bosnian Jews, with a strong sense of Jewish identity."

In the midst of this cold, bleak Sarajevo winter, the flame of Judaism continues to burn.

Efforts are under way to introduce a course in Hebrew. A young member of the community, now living in Israel, will return home to conduct the Passover seders. Older community members have formed a club to converse in Ladino, the Spanish-Jewish language spoken traditionally by members of the Sephardi community.

And every Friday night, two dozen community

members gather in Sarajevo's sole active synagogue and pray.

Dressed for the cold — the synagogue is unheated — they pray for peace not only in Bosnia, but in Israel.

At the end of the service, worshipers, both Jewish and otherwise, embrace.

"Shabbat Shalom," they say. "Shalom, shalom." □

Major Hebron street is reopened amid protests from Jewish settlers

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel has partially reopened a major thoroughfare in Hebron to Palestinian traffic, despite protests from Jewish settlers.

Shuhada, or Martyrs, Street straddles the city's Jewish quarter.

As part of the gradual reopening of the street, which is called for under the Hebron agreements, Palestinian taxis and ambulances can enter the thoroughfare.

The road will be fully opened during the next four months.

Israel sealed the street off in 1994, after Kiryat Arba resident Baruch Goldstein killed 29 Muslim worshippers in the Tomb of the Patriarchs.

Israeli and Palestinian security forces were on hand Monday to prevent any disturbances. Jewish settlers complained that promised security measures, including a concrete barrier, had yet to be carried out. □

State Department releases annual human rights report

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Israel's withdrawal from most major Palestinian population areas in the West Bank improved the human rights situation there in 1996, according to the U.S. State Department.

But setbacks in the Middle East peace process resulted in "serious human rights abuses" by both Israeli and Palestinian authorities, the department said.

"The peace process is the ultimate instrument to advance human rights in the Middle East," said John Shattuck, assistant secretary of state for human rights and humanitarian affairs.

In its annual report on human rights conditions around the world, the State Department said the Israeli government generally respects human rights but added that authorities sometimes mistreat Palestinian security detainees. Most of the abuses by Israeli and Palestinian authorities stemmed from the pursuit of terrorists, said the report, which was released late last week.

"At least two Palestinians died in Israeli prisons," the report said. "Prison conditions are poor." Last year's report, which covered 1995, cited six such deaths.

The State Department said the Palestinian Authority used "excessive force" against detainees in its "intensive efforts to counter and prevent terrorism," resulting in four deaths in 1996. Five such deaths were reported in the previous year.

"In the wake of terrorist bombings, [Palestinian] authorities arrested approximately 1,000 Palestinians suspected of affiliation with extremist Islamic and secular opposition groups and held all but one without charge," the report said, adding that Palestinian prison conditions were "very poor."

The report also took issue with measures the Palestinian Authority took to suppress free speech.

The Palestinian Authority "continued to harass, detain and abuse journalists and political activists who criticized" it, the report said. □

Threats of New York boycott bewilder Swiss, disturb U.S.

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Swiss banks have responded to a threatened boycott by New York politicians with assurances that Switzerland already is working fast to set up a fund for Holocaust victims.

The New York state Assembly and City of New York threatened last week to pull the rug out from under three Swiss banks operating in Manhattan if Switzerland does not make good on its promise to set up the fund.

The Swiss government announced last month that it would work with Swiss banks and insurance companies to establish a fund to begin compensating Holocaust victims and their heirs who might be entitled to assets deposited in Swiss banks during the World War II era.

The Swiss, however, have yet to provide specifics on the fund, and sources close to the issue say several pressing issues are unresolved.

Jewish officials have indicated that they will not wait long for Switzerland to turn its words into deeds, and the move by New York politicians adds another pressure point.

Swiss banking officials reportedly said that they are taking the boycott threat seriously, but expressed bewilderment at the timing of the New York proposals.

"This is hard to understand if you look exactly at what has been done already," Swiss Bankers Association spokeswoman Silvia Matile was quoted as saying. "I don't believe it was necessary to create extra pressure because the pace is already very fast," she added. "The concept for the fund will be worked out in the coming weeks."

New York state Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver said the Assembly's Banking Committee would hold hearings Feb. 13 to examine ways to help Holocaust victims and their heirs reclaim their wealth.

In a statement, Silver said the committee would also review New York state's relationship with Swiss banks and examine how a foreign bank's license or certification could be revoked.

'Cause of justice, morality'

"Swiss bankers must provide a full and honest accounting concerning these unclaimed funds and return these assets to their rightful owners," Silver said. "Our obligation clearly extends to ensuring that all banking institutions operate in New York according to the highest ethical standards."

At the same time, the president of the New York City Council introduced a bill to prevent city funds from being deposited in Swiss banks until the compensation fund is established.

And N.Y. Gov. George Pataki said he plans to order audits to determine whether any looted assets were transferred to the New York branches of Swiss banks.

The actions mark the first time state and local governments have entered into the controversy surrounding the search for missing Jewish assets.

Elan Steinberg, World Jewish Congress executive director, welcomed the New York proposals as further help in "advancing the cause of justice and morality."

The Clinton administration, however, criticized the proposed moves. "At this point, it is important that we cooperate and not front each other with threats that will lead to a retarding of the very real progress that we have made," said Undersecretary of Commerce Stuart Eizenstat, the administration's point man on the issue of missing Jewish assets and Switzerland's wartime role.

At least one Jewish group also said it believed that the threatened boycott is "premature."

"This comes at the very time when more hopeful signs are emerging from the Swiss banking community," said Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League. But he added that such measures could become necessary if the Swiss fail to take action.

Eizenstat also toned down U.S. criticism of a Swiss diplomatic cable that led to the resignation of Switzerland's ambassador to the United States. He said the private strategy paper, which called for a "war" against Switzerland's critics, did contain some "very strong, unfortunate wording." But he said a study of the full document found no signs of anti-Semitism.

Carlo Jagmetti resigned as Swiss ambassador last week after the document he authored was leaked to the media. At a news conference in Washington, Jagmetti released the full text of the secret cable and said it was meant to "energize" Swiss decision-makers to advance the search for missing Jewish assets "as quickly as possible."

He acknowledged that some of his expressions were harsh, but said, "My words were and are a call for the Swiss to get our act together."

In Switzerland, meanwhile, President Arnold Koller and visiting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said they would make every effort to calm Swiss-Jewish relations.

"We're serious when we say we want the full truth also about the troubling time of our history," Koller told reporters after meeting with Netanyahu, who was attending the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.

During a visit to Geneva, meanwhile, U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan also sounded off on the controversy enveloping Switzerland. He called the matter a "public relations disaster" and urged an equitable settlement. "It's unfortunate it has dragged on for so long," Annan said at a news conference. "I hope the issue will be resolved quickly and appropriately and equitably to the satisfaction of all parties concerned."

Annan's sentiment was echoed in Switzerland by several hundred leading Swiss professionals, who issued a statement decrying the way the country has handled the controversy.

Lawyers, artists, teachers, doctors and journalists all joined in signing a petition that called the behavior of the government and banks "an insult not only to the Jewish people but to all the democratically minded inhabitants of our country."

"We consider it all the more imperative that recent Swiss history be further freed of distortion and embellishment, and be rewritten with greater honesty and truth," the petition said. □

Netanyahu invites pope to Israel

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met this week at the Vatican with Pope John Paul II and invited the pontiff to come to Israel.

The pope Monday expressed interest in visiting Israel before the year 2000, but said he would first like to see more progress in the peace process.

"I invited the pope to visit Israel, for the 2,000th anniversary of the birth of Jesus, an important event for Christianity," Netanyahu told Israel media.

"He said he would like to come before then," the premier said. "We said we would discuss details. We haven't set a date, but his admiration for Israel was expressed in his response to this matter and that he said, 'God bless Israel.'"

Netanyahu arrived at the Vatican from Davos, Switzerland, where he attended a forum of world business and political leaders. □

French museums' head denies charges about Jewish-owned art

By Lee Yanowitch

PARIS (JTA) — The head of France's state-run museums is denying accusations that his country's most famous art institutions deliberately avoided tracing the rightful owners of nearly 2,000 works of art looted from Jews during World War II.

Reacting to what has become one of the latest controversies surrounding Europe's wartime history, Francoise Cachin, director of the Musees de France, said the museums, including the Louvre, Musee d'Orsay and Pompidou Center, had been treated unjustly.

"We have been wronged because these works of art were always traceable," Cachin said. "We may not have published a special catalog of them, but they have been included in inventories since the 1950s."

The 1,995 paintings, drawings and sculptures seized or purchased by the Nazis during the occupation of France were returned after the war and provisionally entrusted to French museums, which were required by law to seek out the owners of the works or their heirs.

Cachin said most of the paintings — 1,878 are at the Louvre — were never claimed "because they were not stolen during the occupation but sold," mostly by art dealers to German officers.

The works include sculptures by Rodin and paintings by Picasso, Monet, Cezanne and Renoir.

Serge Cwajgenbaum, secretary general of the Paris-based European Jewish Congress, said most of the works were bought by shady art dealers for far below their value from Jews in urgent need of money because their lives were in danger.

'Reflex of a thief'

Lawyer Arno Klarsfeld, son of Nazi hunter Serge Klarsfeld, said the museums' intention "was to keep what they had, to accumulate more and above all not to give anything back."

"It's the reflex of a thief. If something he steals is taken, he feels he's been robbed," Arno Klarsfeld added.

Hector Feliciano, a Puerto Rican journalist who first revealed the existence of Jewish-owned art in state museums, said in an interview, "There was a complete void in terms of intention or desire to locate the owners." The museums "don't want to give them up," he added.

He said his request to see inventories of the works or to speak with curators was rejected.

"They told me the inventory was still being completed. I was astonished. Still being completed after 50 years?" he said, adding that a promise made by Cachin to list the complete inventory on the Internet by the end of 1996 had not been fulfilled.

The accusations by France's public spending watchdog, the Cour des Comptes, were made in a confidential report disclosed last week by the daily newspaper Le Monde, just two days after Prime Minister Alain Juppe announced he would appoint a commission to investigate wartime seizures of Jewish property.

In a related incident, a Jewish magistrate who had been asked to lead the investigative commission on looted Jewish property has turned down the job. Pierre Draï, 70, a retired president of France's Supreme Court, has not given any reasons for his refusal.

Meanwhile, a document from the U.S. National Archives obtained by the European Jewish Congress shows that Field Marshal Hermann Goering, who looted art treasures for the Third Reich as well as his own private collection, used French detectives and criminals to find hidden artwork belonging to French Jews. □

Jews chose Nazi camp victims, Papon declares in TV interview

By Lee Yanowitch

PARIS (JTA) — Former Vichy official Maurice Papon, who faces trial for crimes against humanity, said in a controversial television interview that Jews who compiled lists of other Jews for deportation to Nazi death camps should be tried as well.

"If Vichy is to be tried, then the trial of the UGIF (General Union of French Jews), which participated under constraint like I did, cannot be avoided," said Papon, 86, imperious and combative during his first public appearance in years.

CRIF, the umbrella group of secular French Jewish organizations, called Papon's remarks scandalous and branded the interview a "parody of justice."

The group attacked television network TF-1 for last week "giving the floor to a man accused of complicity in crimes against humanity."

"Maurice Papon used all imaginable maneuvers to flee his own responsibilities, showing no hesitation in shamefully calling into question the Jewish victims of [Vichy leader] Philippe Petain," CRIF said in a statement.

The UGIF, created by the Nazis as a replica of the "Jewish Councils" formed in occupied Eastern European countries, placed thousands of Jewish children safely with non-Jewish families and fed tens of thousands of Jews impoverished by the seizure of their bank accounts and other assets. But its existence remains controversial.

Advocates point out that its first two presidents died in the gas chambers. Critics maintain that the existence of UGIF helped legitimize German actions and that Jewish inmates of Drancy, a French internment camp, were sometimes forced to draw up deportation lists.

The interview was broadcast five days after France's Supreme Court ordered Papon to stand trial for allegedly ordering the deportation of more than 1,500 Jews when he was secretary general of the southwestern Bordeaux region's local government from 1942 to 1944.

'Ask New York'

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.

Lawyers for the plaintiffs at his trial are expected to argue that Papon joined the Resistance only at the eleventh hour, when an Allied victory had become certain.

In one of the interview's most dramatic moments, journalist Paul Amar showed Papon photographs of two sisters, ages 2 and 5, whom Papon allegedly ordered taken from hiding and delivered to the Nazis.

Papon threw the pictures aside and said, "Mr. Amar, you are simply showing off to your viewers." He handed the girls over after their parents, already arrested, asked to be with them, whatever the outcome, he said.

He denied organizing the deportations and insisted that he stayed at his job at the request of the Resistance.

Papon further claimed that he was the victim of unnamed foreign forces determined to have France share blame with Germany for the Holocaust. Asked who these forces were, he replied, "Ask New York."

Papon served as police chief of Paris between 1958 and 1967, then as budget minister in the French Cabinet during the 1970s. 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. □