



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ **Swiss and Jewish officials hammered out an agreement for the administration of a Holocaust memorial fund.** The Swiss Federal Council is set to consider the proposal Wednesday. [Page 3]

■ **Members of Israel's Knesset Immigration and Absorption Committee expressed broad support for statements by Jewish Agency for Israel Chairman Avraham Burg on the need to refrain from legislation altering the religious status quo or any change in the Law of Return.** Pending conversion legislation in Israel has caused growing concern among many non-Orthodox Jewish leaders worldwide.

■ **Israeli President Ezer Weizman arrived in London, making him the first Israeli leader to make an official visit to England.** Weizman had served as a pilot in the Royal Air Force.

■ **Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat signed a trade and cooperation accord with the European Union.** The pact offers reduced tariffs for Palestinian exports to E.U. countries.

■ **Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert dedicated a plaque at a memorial service marking the one-year anniversary since Islamic suicide bombers attacked a bus in Jerusalem.**

■ **Hungarian Jews demonstrated in front of the Dohany Street Synagogue in downtown Budapest demanding that Germany compensate their community.** The protest coincided with the official three-day visit of German President Roman Herzog, who went to the synagogue on his first day in Hungary.

■ **A former kosher butcher in Jacksonville, Fla., was arrested in connection with a pipe bomb discovered at a local synagogue.** The device was disarmed shortly before a recent speech by former Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres.

■ **"Schindler's List" drew more than 65 million viewers on NBC Sunday night — the network's best Sunday of regular programming since it began tracking ratings 14 years ago.**

Construction at Har Homa could begin in two weeks

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Construction of a controversial new Jewish neighborhood in southeastern Jerusalem could begin within two weeks.

The Har Homa project has been vehemently opposed by Palestinians and just as strongly endorsed by members of Netanyahu's Likud-led Cabinet as well as several Labor Knesset members.

In remarks to reporters Tuesday at the Knesset, Netanyahu said construction at Har Homa was within Israel's full rights as the sovereign power in the city and warned against a violent Palestinian reaction to the plan.

"I want to clarify unequivocally: We will build in all of Jerusalem. We will also build at Har Homa," Netanyahu said.

"Whoever wants the peace process to continue will understand that violence will achieve nothing."

Approval of the first phase of building at Har Homa, totaling some 2,450 housing units, was expected at a Wednesday meeting of a ministerial committee dealing with Jerusalem affairs.

The committee also was expected to be presented with plans for the construction of a similar number of housing units for Arab residents in some 10 neighborhoods in eastern Jerusalem.

Once the committee approves construction at Har Homa, bulldozers will begin clearing land within about two weeks.

This would coincide with the first of three Israeli redeployments in rural areas of the West Bank called for in the Hebron agreement, signed Jan. 17 by Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

Under the terms of that accord, Israel was to carry out the first of those redeployments by the end of the first week in March; the final redeployment was scheduled to be completed by mid-1998.

Israeli security officials were quoted as telling the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee on Tuesday that if the Palestinians responded violently to the Har Homa decision, the first redeployment could be delayed.

Palestinian officials have warned that construction at Har Homa would torpedo the peace process and could unleash a violent reaction that would dwarf the riots that erupted in September after Israel opened a new entrance to an archaeological tunnel near Jerusalem's Temple Mount. Fifteen Israelis and 61 Palestinians were killed during the three days of violence.

The Palestinians, who want eastern Jerusalem as the capital of a future independent state, view the Har Homa project as changing the status quo in the city, whose future is to be determined in the final-status negotiations.

U.N. Security Council expresses concern

Faisal Husseini, the Palestinian Authority's top official in Jerusalem, told reporters Tuesday that Israel is "playing with fire," adding that "there will be an explosion" if the Har Homa project proceeded.

The U.N. Security Council expressed concern Tuesday about Israel's plans and called for restraint so as not to undo the Middle East peace process.

A group of E.U. diplomats in Jerusalem on Tuesday also voiced its reservations about the project.

Israeli officials counter that the project will help alleviate a housing shortage in Jerusalem. They also say it will provide needed housing for Arab residents of the city.

From a legal standpoint, they point out, there is no basis to Palestinian claims that the planned construction represents a violation of any signed agreements, adding that the Jewish state has no obligation to coordinate such plans with the Palestinian Authority.

When Netanyahu recently returned from a trip to the United States, he drew fire from conservative members of his coalition over rumors that he had promised President Clinton to freeze the Har Homa project to avoid tensions with the Palestinians.

Members of the opposition also joined the chorus of complaints against delays in construction, noting that the Har Homa project had been approved by the previous government. □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES**An unremarkable life sparks many questions in violent death***By Mitchell Danow*

NEW YORK (JTA) — He led an unremarkable life, but his final act of violence that brought it to an end has sparked a host of questions.

Indeed, had it not been for his sudden, perhaps irrational, assault atop the Empire State Building this week, Ali Abu Kamal's life may not have been remembered — let alone questioned — except by family members and friends.

But now there are questions, and some may go unanswered.

In the immediate aftermath of Sunday's shooting of seven people, one fatally, New York City investigators said the 69-year-old Palestinian had acted alone and that personal misfortune, not Middle East politics, had motivated the senseless crime.

But police officials later confirmed that they had found on Kamal — who turned his 14-shot Beretta pistol on himself at the end of his rampage — two letters in English and Arabic condemning the United States, as well as Great Britain and France, for oppressing the Palestinian people.

The letters, which officials described as bitter and rambling, also lashed out at Zionism, prompting the question of whether there had been a political motive for the mass shooting.

But the letters also referred to two unnamed business partners whom Kamal accused of swindling him out of his life savings.

Kamal's gun killed Christoffer Burmeister, a 27-year-old jazz guitarist for the Bush Pilots, a Danish rock band.

Among the seriously wounded was Matthew Gross, a 27-year-old Jewish band member from Montclair, N.J. Also wounded were a 52-year-old Argentine man; a 30-year-old Swiss man; a 35-year-old New York City man; and a married couple from Verdun, France.

Victim of Islamic vigilantes

Kamal's family members in his hometown of Gaza City said he had no connection to any Islamic militant groups.

In fact, he had once been a victim of such groups.

In 1992, Kamal had been abducted by a band of Islamic vigilantes who broke his legs and an arm after several days of beatings. According to graffiti the vigilantes later painted on walls, they said they had beat Kamal because he smoked hashish and drank alcohol, a violation of Islamic law.

There also were rumors that he had also been punished for having extramarital affairs.

Relatives said Kamal, an English teacher, was distraught over big financial losses he had suffered since his arrival in the United States on Christmas Eve.

"My husband is not a terrorist, he was just hopeless," Fathiya Abu Kamal, 55, was quoted as saying. "He was aged, he had nothing to do with politics, or terrorism, or crime."

But the amount of money he was said to have lost to unscrupulous business partners — variously put at \$300,000 to \$500,000 — also prompted questions.

Kamal, who had become fluent in English after working for several years for the U.N. Relief and Works Agency, had been a successful English teacher at a Gaza high school and university, as well as a well-paid tutor and translator.

Family members said he had amassed his nest egg

after 50 years of hard work and sound investments in Egypt and Switzerland.

Just the same, a nest egg of as much as a half-million dollars seemed remarkable to some in a place like Gaza, especially given what were described as his lavish spending habits, to say nothing of the demands he faced in supporting six children.

Kamal had fled his native town of Jaffa, near Tel Aviv, during the 1948 War of Independence. Like tens of thousands of Palestinian refugees, he settled his family in Gaza.

Whatever the precise total of his savings, Kamal decided to seek a new and better life in the United States.

His plan, family members said, was to increase his fortune and then bring his wife and children to the United States.

But within weeks after arriving in New York, he traveled to Florida, where he bought the Beretta, according to officials.

He later returned to New York by bus, presumably to avoid detection of the pistol by airport security — giving credence to the theory that Sunday's shooting spree had been premeditated.

New York City police officials provided further evidence to that effect when they announced this week that Kamal had visited the 86th-floor observation deck on Saturday, one day before the shooting.

In one more unanswered question prompted by the case, it remained unclear whether his first visit to the site of the crime was designed to check security at the New York landmark, or if he had brought the gun along, but backed off from carrying out the crime.

His family members said he had called them over the weekend to tell them that he was facing financial troubles.

When they heard news of the shooting, they said they could not believe who had carried it out until they called a friend in the United States who confirmed that it indeed had been Kamal.

His family soon set up a traditional mourning tent outside their 1-story home in the relatively fashionable Al-Hawa neighborhood in Gaza City.

In the tent, where the family receives for three days friends who come to pay condolences, people sipped Turkish coffee and asked each other why Kamal had carried out the crime.

As elsewhere in the world, there was much speculation, but no firm answers. □

(JTA correspondent Gil Sedan in Jerusalem contributed to this report.)

IDF kills Palestinian, wounds 2*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — One Palestinian was killed and two others wounded this week in clashes with undercover Israeli soldiers operating in an Arab village north of Jerusalem.

The soldiers, dressed in civilian clothing, had entered the Hizme village to detain a suspect, Israel Defense Force sources said.

When they brought the suspect out of his house, a crowd of people surrounded the soldiers and began to throw stones.

The soldiers, fearing for their lives, opened fire, aiming at the residents' knees, army officials said.

One of the Palestinians, identified as Abdel Aziz Halawi, was shot and later died of his wounds in the hospital.

The two others apparently were beaten by the soldiers. □

Fate of Holocaust memorial fund now lies with Swiss government

By Fredy Rom

BERN (JTA) — The fate of a Swiss Holocaust memorial fund now lies in the hands of the Swiss government.

Lengthy meetings early this week here between Swiss and Jewish officials produced an agreement about how to administer the fund, recently established by Switzerland's three main banks.

The Swiss Federal Council was scheduled to consider final approval of the agreement on Wednesday.

Announcement of the fund, which the banks infused with some \$68 million, had ended months of public acrimony over Swiss compensation for dormant bank accounts of Holocaust victims as well as for the nation's wartime role.

The Swiss government has said it, too, will contribute to the fund, but only after a panel investigating Switzerland's wartime role is released later this year.

At issue has been who will be in charge of the distribution of the funds and who will be its beneficiaries, officials say. The World Jewish Congress, which has spearheaded the bid for compensation, has insisted that the World Jewish Restitution Organization be in charge of distributing the funds to the Jewish Holocaust victims.

Israel Singer, secretary general of the WJC and chairman of executive committee of the WJRO, and Swiss Foreign Minister Flavio Cotti, had reached an agreement in principle on the matter during talks Monday in Bern, according to a well-placed Swiss government official who asked not to be identified.

But the Swiss official said the Israeli representative to the WJRO, Bobby Brown, had raised questions about the agreement. As a result, the Swiss official said, "we had to start from the beginning."

"The State of Israel has the most survivors of the Holocaust," Brown said in a brief interview before Tuesday's meeting. "Therefore, the prime minister decided that the State of Israel should play a more active role in the talks with the Swiss."

Non-Jewish victims are also expected to receive compensation, including Gypsies, who were represented at the meetings this week.

Officials would not disclose specifics of the agreement, but sources said the WJRO was flexible on some issues, such as the inclusion of Swiss officials on the administering committee. But the Jews would not have agreed to anything less than the bottom-line demands that there be a Jewish majority on the committee administering the fund and that the Jews have ultimate authority for distributing the funds to Jewish victims.

In New York, Elan Steinberg, executive director of the WJC, said, "The shape of the agreement as it is now protects Jewish interests. That's the bottom line for us." He said if the committee is established quickly, victims could begin receiving funds as early as this summer. □

Germany to stop paying some SS veteran pensions

By Daniel Dagan

BONN (JTA) — The German government will stop paying pensions March 1 to some suspected war criminals who live outside Germany.

But World War II Nazis who now reside in Germany will continue to receive the supplementary "victim pensions," pending the reform of the 1950 law that made the payments possible in the first place.

The revelations have angered Jewish officials

around the world, who say the situation is an insult to the victims of Nazi terror.

The German television program "Panorama" had reported earlier this year that some 50,000 war criminals were receiving the special pensions, worth billions of dollars each year. Last week, the same program reported that German government agencies were helping conceal payments of the special pensions to members of Adolf Hitler's elite SS who live abroad.

The "victim pensions" come on top of regular pensions. They were designed to compensate soldiers who had war injuries and to pay benefits to the families of those soldiers killed in the war. A provision of the 1950 law allows Bonn to stop payments to veterans who move outside Germany and who may be war criminals.

A group of German lawmakers has already sought to block the continued payment of special pensions to people they claim are war criminals. Their call for an amended law came amid recent reports that the German Labor Ministry received hundreds of applications for state pensions from Dutch citizens who served in SS units.

According to the ministry, which is responsible for pensions, the "victim pensions" are issued to anyone whose health was impaired by the war.

Uwe Beckmeyer, the German official who is responsible for paying out the special pensions to German citizens who live in the Americas, said sufficient legal grounds existed to discontinue the payments to Germans who live overseas and have records as Nazi criminals.

Beckmeyer, the labor minister of the German state of Bremen, said German authorities had started to screen just who receives the special pensions.

"We are using all the sources available: German, American, Canadian and other records as well as press reports and information supplied by individuals," he said. "However, it might take some time till we finish to compare the names of the known criminals to the list of beneficiaries who live outside Germany."

Two of those who will no longer receive the pensions are accused war criminals Kazys Ciurinskas and Alexander Lehmann, both of whom live in the United States.

'Mocks the real victims'

Ciurinskas, 78, will no longer receive \$250 each month. He has received the German pension since 1966 and has lived in recent years in Indiana. He is suspected of serving in a Lithuanian battalion during World War II.

Lehmann, who lives in Cleveland, will no longer receive \$126 a month.

In December, Jewish leaders had called on Germany to publish the names of former members of the Waffen SS who now live in the United States and Britain and receive the pensions.

In response to the revelations about war criminals receiving a special monthly stipend, Ignatz Bubis, leader of the German Jewish community, said in a statement: "I could never have imagined that such people would be receiving a victim's pension. It mocks the real victims."

David Harris, executive director of the American Jewish Committee, which has worked toward securing compensation for Jews in Central and Eastern Europe, said, "There's something profoundly troubling about the presence in the West, including the United States, of hundreds and thousands" of war criminals receiving pensions. Harris added that at the same time, the German government has said it could not offer additional compensation for Jews because of its strapped budget.

"There's a tragic irony in that," he said. □

(JTA staff writer Alissa Kaplan in New York contributed to this report.)

Caught up in political furor, Albanian Jews ponder future

By Michael J. Jordan

TIRANA, Albania (JTA) — Unlike most Albanians today, Rashed Kohen Cikuli and Luiza Konomi are able to share an inside joke about the pyramid-scheme scandal that has rocked this tiny Balkan nation.

The vast majority of Albanians were swept up last year in the frenzy to make "easy money," sinking an estimated \$2 billion into the high-risk investment schemes.

Since last month, when several of the pyramids collapsed, demonstrators have demanded repayment and called on the government to resign for not protecting the public.

But Cikuli, 71, found a way to resist temptation.

"I was more Jewish than the others," the retired pediatrician said with a grin. "I didn't trust those companies, and I wasn't going to just throw my money away."

His friend, Konomi, however, had other thoughts in mind.

The president of Albania's tiny Jewish community had wanted to recoup the costs of sending her son to Israel for three years. She would not divulge how much she invested and lost, but says jokingly, "I'm only half-Jewish."

With her husband making a good living as a parliamentarian, Konomi's family will most likely recover easily enough.

But not all Albanian Jews — who number only about 60 in the entire country — got off so lightly.

One older Jewish man, a prominent translator of German literature into Albanian, refused to be interviewed on the subject. Still, he railed against the government, complaining that he had been left "hungry and sitting in darkness."

Society at large shares his bitterness.

The government originally endorsed the high-risk schemes, declaring them a key to Albania's economic turnaround. Reassured, many Albanians sold their farms and homes and poured in their life's savings. In protests earlier this month, at least four people were killed in clashes with police.

JDC waiting in the wings

Some observers fear that the situation may escalate into civil war, pitting pro- and anti-government forces against each other. Others worry about the added financial hardship that Europe's poorest country will shoulder when trying to compensate investors.

Meanwhile, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee is waiting in the wings, ready to respond to the needs of the Jewish community.

"Of course we don't believe we should give financial support if someone made a bad financial investment, but we're carefully watching what will happen with the general economic situation," said Manlio Dell'Aricecia, the JDC's Rome-based Albania country director.

The relief agency first began assisting Albanian Jewry in 1991, when one of communism's most rigid regimes yielded to free elections.

At the same time, about 300 Albanian Jews immigrated to Israel, leaving behind just 17 families.

Until then, Albania had been the most isolated — and economically backward — country in Europe. But Albanians themselves had also developed a reputation for their hospitality and tolerance, perhaps a result of their own religious diversity.

It is a secular society, with 70 percent of the population Muslim, 20 percent Orthodox Christian and 10 percent Roman Catholic. Inter-marriage is common.

During World War II, Albanians protected their small, mostly Sephardi Jewish community and sheltered hundreds more who fled from Yugoslavia, Italy and Greece.

A disproportionate number of Albanians have been proclaimed "Righteous Gentiles" in Israel for their role in saving Jews, Dell'Aricecia said.

But earlier heroics mattered little during the brutal Stalinist rule of Enver Hoxha. Among other restrictions, he outlawed religion. Those daring to practice their faith risked imprisonment.

In those days, the Jewish High Holidays, if observed at all, were celebrated clandestinely at home with only immediate family.

The Communist propaganda against Israel compounded the problem for Jews.

Israel was painted as a pawn of the capitalist arch-enemy, the United States.

For some Albanians, that made all Jews — referred to as "Israelites" — suspect. Discrimination was never overt, Cikuli said, but Jews were often treated as outsiders. In the workplace, they routinely bumped up against a glass ceiling while colleagues were promoted.

But any latent tension apparently dissipated in 1991, when Albania shed its communism and allied itself with the United States and Israel.

As evidence, Konomi and Cikuli point to their own families. Konomi's husband, Maksim, was recently Albanian's minister of science and technology. He is not Jewish, but during the old days not even the spouse of a Jew could hold such a prestigious post, she said.

Cikuli's son, who is Jewish, is the current minister of health. Their positions, and the desire to stay close to their non-Jewish relatives, were main reasons both families stayed in Albania when many others left for Israel.

Now they and other Jewish families, who are sprinkled across the country, are also learning what it means to be Jewish.

The JDC is pitching in with deliveries of prayer books, calendars and how-to guides to the holidays. Last year, most of the families gathered in the capital, Tirana, to celebrate together each of the major holidays.

"Today we're allowed to be proud to be Jewish," said Konomi, who is also vice chairwoman of the Albania-Israel Friendship Association.

"And we're also proud to know that we have the State of Israel as a state of our own."

Yet despite this renewal of faith, the current political and economic crisis has many Albanian Jews considering a dash to Israel.

For Cikuli, that would be a tough call. She was born in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, and moved to Albania in 1950 after marrying an Albanian. "I left my homeland once," she said, "so I know how painful it can be." □

German court sentences neo-Nazi

By Daniel Dagan

BONN (JTA) — A Berlin court recently sentenced a neo-Nazi activist to one year in prison for inciting racial discrimination and circulating anti-Semitic propaganda.

The court called 25-year-old Hans-Christian Wendt, a leading member of a right wing group known as The Nationals, a "spiritual arsonist and a leading figure of the neo-Nazi scene in Berlin and Brandenburg."

When Wendt was arrested at his home, police confiscated large quantities of Holocaust denial literature and 50 books containing instructions on how to win support for neo-Nazi ideas. The court labeled the material "a dangerous attempt to justify the mass killing of the Jews." □