

NEWS AT A GLANCE

- **The State of Ohio Court of Appeals struck down the Cleveland school voucher program, which would have allowed state-subsidized parochial and private education for low-income students. The decision reversed a lower court's ruling. An appeal is expected.**
- **U.S. special envoy Dennis Ross is scheduled to arrive in the Middle East at the beginning of next week in another bid to renew peace negotiations with the Palestinians. [Page 3]**
- **Syrian President Hafez Assad accused Israel of slamming the door on peace. He made the remarks after talks in the Sinai with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. [Page 3]**
- **Israeli soldiers and police forcibly removed two trailer homes illegally set up near the West Bank settlement of Mizpe Jericho.**
- **Palestinian attacks against Israelis accounted for the second deadliest spate of international terrorism in 1996, ranking only behind Sri Lankan terrorism, according to the State Department's annual report on global terrorism. [Page 3]**
- **Two sites in Tampa, Fla., rejected requests by a neo-Nazi group seeking to host a speech May 10 by David Duke, the former leader of the Ku Klux Klan and former Louisiana state representative, the Tampa Tribune reported. The group is the National Alliance, based in West Virginia and an advocate of white supremacy.**
- **Skinheads and left-wing extremists clashed in several cities in Germany where there were traditional celebrations of May Day. In Leipzig, however, thousands of neo-Nazi demonstrators were prevented from staging a planned rally after a German court declared it illegal.**
- **French right-wing politician Jean-Marie Le Pen said he would not run in this month's parliamentary election, the first time in decades he will not be part of a campaign. But his National Front is reportedly aiming for 20 seats.**

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD**Uzbekistan Jews enjoy tolerance in predominantly Muslim country***By Lev Krichevsky*

TASHKENT, Uzbekistan (JTA) — Twenty-five years ago, Rabbi Abba Gurevitch taught secretly at an underground yeshiva here.

In a sign of the changes that have taken place since the 1991 fall of the Soviet Union, Gurevitch now works in this former Soviet republic as chief representative of the worldwide Lubavitch movement.

Not only is he able to work openly in this predominantly Muslim country, but he and his colleagues in the Lubavitch-run Jewish Education Center in Central Asia have been granted diplomatic immunity by Uzbekistan's Foreign Ministry.

"A few decades ago, we worked here underground and many of the Jewish activists paid for it," Gurevitch says, referring to how Jewish religious leaders during the Soviet era were exiled for their activities. "Today we are accredited to the foreign ministry and can enjoy certain privileges."

Uzbekistan's Jews appear to appreciate the government's benevolent attitude toward them. In the Tashkent Jewish day school, there are photographs of Uzbekistan President Islam Karimov as well as Rabbi Menachem Schneerson, the late Lubavitcher rebbe, in every classroom.

Uzbekistan's Jewish roots run deep.

Until the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, the community was made up of Bukharan Jews, named after Bukhara, one of the region's major cities, which had a sizable number of Jews since the 16th century.

Bukharan Jews, an ancient Jewish group of Persian origin, trace their history in Uzbekistan back to the 8th century. Over the centuries, years of relative tolerance alternated with periods of forcible conversions to Islam.

After the region was conquered by Russia in the second half of the 19th century, the majority of Bukharan Jews — who had previously been engaged in yarn and fabric dyeing — faced difficult times because of the rise of the commercial textile industry established here by the Russians.

Local Jews had to take on different occupations, with the majority becoming hairdressers, shoemakers, tailors and photographers — the four "Jewish professions" as they are known here to this day.

When mass Jewish emigration from Uzbekistan began in the late 1980s, the local population suddenly found it difficult to have their shoes repaired, to have their family's picture taken or to get a haircut, says Boris, a photographer from the city of Samarkand. Now, there are many non-Jews in these professions, he says. Since 1989, about 90,000 Jews left Uzbekistan for Israel. Thousands of others moved to the United States.

'There are few Jewish kids left in town'

Leah Abdurakhmanova, a 53-year-old hospital nurse from the city of Bukhara, is a mother of three. Her two adult daughters live in Israel and the United States, and the youngest son is staying with his mother in Bukhara.

She has visited her daughters, but she is not planning to emigrate.

"I wish we could all live together," she says with regret. "But I don't think I could adjust to life" abroad. Like many Jews in Central Asia, Leah blames her situation on former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, who introduced the policy of glasnost, or openness, which led to mass Jewish emigration from across the Soviet Union. "Why did Gorbachev open the borders?" she says. "If he didn't do that, no one would have left."

Unlike Leah, most Jews here are thinking of emigrating.

Roma, a 12-year-old student at the Samarkand Jewish day school, says he likes his school, where he can study English, Hebrew and Judaism.

He says these subjects are very important for his future because someday "we will go to Israel or America."

"Jews are leaving, all my relatives. Friends are now in Israel and New York. There are few Jewish kids left in town." Uzbekistan's Jewish community numbers today about 30,000, two-thirds of them living in the capital of Tashkent. Samarkand and Bukhara, the two major Jewish centers that had 10,000 to 15,000 Jews each some ten years ago, now each have Jewish populations of 1,500.

The main factor behind the current emigration of Bukharan Jews is

their desire to be reunited with their families. Bukharan Jews traditionally live in big families, and regular family get-togethers are an important part of their culture. A few years ago, a birth, wedding ceremony or funeral could attract several hundred people.

"Now, I cannot expect more than 50 people to attend my family anniversary," says Simcha Yusupov, a worker in the 150-year-old Samarkand synagogue.

"Family ties are what makes us leave this place. Personally, I don't want to go, but all my brothers and sisters are in Israel. There's nothing else left."

Says Leah from Bukhara, "Family ties are broken. That's why everyone is leaving."

Human rights groups have criticized President Karimov's authoritarian rule and his intolerance of political opposition groups. Just the same, the government has shown tolerance to its Jewish community as well as to other non-Uzbeks, who comprise 30 percent of the country's 23 million population.

Jews here enjoy full freedom of religion and emigration, as do other minorities. For decades, Uzbekistan has been known for its relatively low levels of anti-Semitism. During World War II, the country offered refuge to 200,000 Jews from Eastern and Central Europe fleeing the Nazi persecution.

The family of Lubavitch emissary Abba Gurevitch was among those who fled to Uzbekistan from Nazi-occupied Ukraine.

Ashkenazi Jews, who now make up the majority of the Jewish community, settled here in Soviet times, many of them escaping the Nazi occupation of Ukraine, Byelorussia and Poland during World War II.

The Ashkenazim have become the most assimilated portion of the local Jewish community. Their rate of intermarriage is several times higher than among more traditional Bukharan Jews.

Like the Bukharan Jews, the Ashkenazim are also emigrating from Uzbekistan in large numbers, including doctors, teachers and engineers.

Members of the Ashkenazi community say they are leaving because of the economic problems and uncertain political situation in this Central Asian republic.

"After the collapse of the Soviet Union, we found ourselves in a country with a different mentality and culture," says Alexander Vishnevetsky, an activist at the Tashkent Jewish Center, the leading organization of Ashkenazi Jews.

The Ashkenazim long identified with Russian culture, and now they feel uncomfortable in the predominantly Muslim Uzbekistan, which is trying to build its own national identity based on Islamic culture and values.

"We are very grateful to the Uzbeks, who gave us safe haven during and after the war," says Vishnevetsky, a former inmate of the Jewish ghetto in Ukraine. "But today we feel there is no future for us here."

David Abramov, a 65-year-old Bukharan Jew from Samarkand, is more optimistic about the future of the community. "Everyone is leaving, but still there are so many Jews around," he says. "I can't explain that. They are inexhaustible, and I don't think we will ever have to close down our synagogue." □

Hundreds of Jews attend communal seders in Poland

By Ruth E. Gruber

ROME (JTA) — Hundreds of Jews attended communal seders in Warsaw and other Polish cities this year, and many others hosted the Passover meal in their own homes.

On the first night of Passover, more than 300

people attended a seder organized at Warsaw's Forum Hotel by the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation, a New York-based foundation that runs Jewish youth and education programs. More than 160 people came on the second night.

At the same time, about 90 people participated in a seder organized by the Jewish Forum, an association of Jewish business and professional people, and some 50 others attended a seder organized by the Jewish religious community.

"There was a form of coordination," Rabbi Michael Schudrich, the Lauder Foundation's Poland director, said in a telephone interview. "We each tried to provide a service to different parts of the Jewish community."

Schudrich said that there were so many people attending the Lauder Foundation's first seder that the banquet hall had to be divided so that two seders could run concurrently.

One was led by Schudrich for about 200 people, including the U.S. ambassador. The other was led by Helise Lieberman, the director of Warsaw's Jewish day school, for about 100 mainly school-age children and their families.

Schudrich said Warsaw's mayor attended the second Lauder Foundation seder.

Significantly, more people held seders in their own homes, Schudrich said.

"People who came to our joint seder four or five years ago now make seders at home," he said. "Yet we still had such a large attendance. This means that we are really growing — and more."

Schudrich said that the Lauder Foundation and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee sent matzah and other Passover supplies to Jewish communities across Poland.

Community seders also were held in about a dozen cities outside Warsaw, including Szczecin, Gdansk, Lodz, Wroclaw, Legnica, Walbrzych, Katowice, Bytom, Krakow, Czestochowa and Lublin, he said. □

School trip to Jordanian island broke Education Ministry policy

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A committee investigating the March shooting deaths of seven Israeli schoolgirls by a Jordanian soldier has recommended that the head of the Education Ministry's security division be dismissed.

A Jordanian soldier opened fire March 13 on a group of Beit Shemesh students on a field trip to a border site, Naharayim, called "The Island of Peace."

The island was transferred to Jordan under the 1994 peace treaty, but the area, a popular tourist destination, is farmed by Israelis.

The committee, which is headed by Reserve Brig. Gen. Yigal Pressler, concluded that the Education Ministry's top security official had failed in carrying out his duties.

Pressler, a former anti-terror adviser to the prime minister, said that while thousands of students had visited Naharayim since Israel and Jordan signed the peace treaty, Education Ministry policy barred school trips there.

The committee said that the head of the ministry's security division, Shlomo Tzudkavitz, should have implemented that policy.

The committee further recommended an administrative reprimand to Moshe Yablovitz, the principal of the Beit Shemesh school.

Education Minister Zevulun Hammer said he would adopt the recommendations of the committee. □

Israel, Palestinians await return of U.S. envoy Ross*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross is scheduled to visit the region next week, in another bid to renew the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

All parties agreed in principle to the visit during Ross' last shuttle mission to the region two weeks ago, Israel Radio reported.

The sole accomplishment of that mission was a meeting between Israeli and Palestinian security heads to discuss the resumption of security cooperation between the two sides. But there have been few signs of cooperation since that meeting.

The Palestinians suspended most diplomatic and security contacts with Israel in March, after Israel began building a new Jewish neighborhood at Har Homa in southeastern Jerusalem.

A subsequent wave of terrorist attacks and violent demonstrations in the territories provoked an Israeli demand that the Palestinian Authority crack down on terror as a condition for resuming negotiations.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reiterated Thursday that he remained committed to the peace process.

Despite the difficulties and crises, Netanyahu said, his government was on a path of peace.

Meanwhile, the director-general of the Foreign Ministry, Eitan Ben Tsur, moved to dispel reports of an internal ministry document saying that the peace process is dead.

Ben Tsur acknowledged that the head of a research desk in the ministry had referred to such assessments in the Arab world, "but the Foreign Ministry opinion is that the peace process is alive and well."

A different view was heard Thursday in the Sinai, where Syrian President Hafez Assad held talks with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in the Sinai resort of Sharm el-Sheik.

Speaking after the meeting, Assad accused Israel of "slamming the door on peace."

He also responded to reports in Israel that Damascus was developing a lethal nerve gas, saying that "whoever has a nuclear arsenal should not be critical of others."

Although Assad had pressed for a pan-Arab summit on the political situation, he deferred to Mubarak's preference that a smaller forum be convened with Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Saudi Arabia and the Palestinians. □

Palestinian terrorist attacks rank No. 2 in annual U.S. report*By Matthew Dorf*

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Palestinian attacks against Israelis accounted for the second deadliest spate of international terrorism in 1996, the State Department stated in its annual report, "Patterns of Global Terrorism."

Hamas and Islamic Jihad launched fewer, but more deadly, attacks in 1996 than in the previous year, including a string of four suicide bombings, according to the report, which was issued this week.

Only terrorism in Sri Lanka accounted for more deaths in 1996.

According to the State Department, the number of international terrorist acts in 1996 fell to a 25-year low. There were 296 acts last year, compared to 665 in 1986, which was the highest rate in the 25 years the State Department has been keeping track, Philip Wilcox, U.S. counterterrorism coordinator, told reporters.

At the same time, the number of casualties rose to 311 last year, compared to 177 in 1995.

Palestinian terror groups continue to get their support from Iran, Wilcox said.

Iran has "worked very hard to undermine the Middle East peace process by support for the Hezbollah, the Hamas, and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad," he said, accusing Iran of being "a flagrant violator of international norms."

Because of this support and other terrorist activities, the report continues to list Iran as a state sponsor of terrorism.

The report's findings mandate a ban in U.S. assistance to the seven state sponsors of terrorism. The list also includes Syria, Libya, Iraq, Sudan, Cuba, and North Korea. In addition to being banned from non-humanitarian aid, the countries cannot import advanced U.S. technology or machinery that could have a military use. □

Knesset nixes calls to launch state inquiry of Bar-On affair*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The controversy over the Bar-On affair shifted to the Knesset this week, where a stormy debate took place over calls for the appointment of a state commission of inquiry into the matter.

The Knesset, called back for a special session during its Passover recess, defeated motions on Wednesday by Labor and Meretz calling for a state inquiry.

In another development, the High Court of Justice announced Thursday that it will convene a five-justice panel May 14 to hear petitions prompted by the Bar-On affair. The petitions, filed by citizens groups and opposition Knesset members, call for the formation of a state commission of inquiry and demand that the prime minister and justice minister resign.

Meanwhile, Deputy Finance Minister David Magen of the Geshar Party announced that, at the request of Foreign Minister and Geshar head David Levy, he had suspended his plans to resign in protest over the Bar-On affair.

Magen said he had agreed to wait two weeks before making a final decision on his resignation.

Israel's attorney general announced last week that there was insufficient evidence to act on police recommendations to indict Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Justice Minister Tzachi Hanegbi, despite grave improprieties in the short-lived January appointment of Roni Bar-On as attorney general.

The only figure who will be indicted is Shas Knesset member Aryeh Deri, who allegedly pushed for Bar-On's appointment in order to get a plea bargain in his corruption trial. Opposition members said this week that the police probe and attorney general's report had only addressed the criminal aspects of the affair, and a state commission of inquiry was now needed to investigate its ethical and moral ramifications.

Communications Minister Limor Livnat called opposition demands for a state commission another attempt to bring down the government, and a challenge to the judicial branch of the government.

Netanyahu said the whole affair was an attempt by left-wing politicians and media to reverse the mandate given him by the electorate. He admitted to making mistakes, but said he was vindicated of any criminal act.

Despite speculation that Justice Minister Tzachi Hanegbi might be replaced in the wake of the attorney general's report, Netanyahu made clear this week that he had no plans to make any Cabinet changes.

"I am not engaged in a Cabinet reshuffle," Netanyahu said on CNN. "There is much more important work to be done." □

Jewish groups aid community in flooded North Dakota town

By Marshall Hoffman
American Jewish World

MINNEAPOLIS (JTA) — The tiny Jewish community in Grand Forks, N.D., has been hit hard by recent flooding in the Red River Valley.

The entire city, including some 50 Jewish families, was forced to evacuate as a result of the natural disaster that struck before Passover.

B'nai Israel Synagogue, the only Jewish institution in Grand Forks, incurred some damage to its library, basement and social hall.

But the sanctuary, prayer books and Torah scrolls are intact, Robin Silverman, president of the 58-year-old Reform synagogue, reported to the Union of American Hebrew Congregations this week.

Passover seders were coordinated by Col. Daniel Halpern, a Jewish officer stationed at the Grand Forks Air Force Base.

Some 15 Jewish individuals are stationed at the Air Force base.

About 30 Jewish families have gone in and out of the shelter set up at the base, floating between there and friends' homes.

"Many have left the Grand Forks area," said Jay Tcath, executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Minnesota and the Dakotas.

The JCRC's disaster relief committee has been heading to area flood sites in "dire need of clean-up assistance" for the past few weekends.

"There are Jewish families here willing to do whatever is necessary to ensure that people have a seder to attend," Tcath wrote prior to Passover in a letter to a JCRC board member who lives in Grand Forks.

"Amidst all that has happened and all that lied ahead, we hope that the uplifting, joyous, and sweet messages of Pesach resonate for your community and can mark a new beginning."

National Jewish organizations also are responding to the crisis.

The Council of Jewish Federations has asked all federations to open mail boxes to accept donations for flood victims throughout the Midwestern region of the United States and Canada. □

Germany to surrender list of Nazi veterans living in U.S.

By Michael Shapiro
Washington Jewish Week

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The German government, declaring it is committed to bringing Nazi war criminals to justice, will soon provide the United States with the names of Nazi Waffen SS soldiers who are currently living in the United States and receiving pensions from Germany.

The U.S. Justice Department's Office of Special Investigations, which is in charge of hunting Nazi war criminals living in the United States, is planning to determine whether or not these former soldiers are suspected Nazi war criminals, according to Eli Rosenbaum, OSI's director.

"The government of the Federal Republic of Germany and the U.S. administration are both committed to investigating crimes against humanity, particularly crimes from the Nazi period, and bringing their perpetrators to justice," Friedrich Bohl, German Chancellor Helmut Kohl's chief of staff, wrote in a March 21 letter to Rep. Gary Ackerman (D-N.Y.).

Ackerman, along with the American Jewish Committee and New York City Public Advocate Mark Green, pushed Germany to provide the United States with the list containing some 3,300 names.

Bohl indicated in his letter that nearly half the names on the list are the dependents of deceased soldiers who received the pensions because of injuries that they suffered during service in the Wehrmacht, or German army, or in the Waffen SS.

Rosenbaum said OSI will check the names of the soldiers still alive against the U.S. database of suspected Nazi war criminals.

The database, which has 60,000 names, is the largest one in the world.

Officials also will check the names against documents overseas.

While the list will provide OSI with numerous leads, Rosenbaum said it is "too early to say what investigative fruit it may bear."

If a person on the list is suspected of being a Nazi war criminal, Rosenbaum said OSI will launch a full-fledged investigation which could lead to legal action and the loss of their U.S. citizenship.

After the war, the United States decided that service in the Waffen SS would not disqualify people from becoming U.S. citizens because Waffen SS units were primarily combat units, Rosenbaum said.

However, there were many Waffen SS units that did "engage in terrible atrocities," he said.

In February, after revelations that Waffen SS veterans living in the United States were receiving pensions from the German government, Ackerman wrote to President Clinton, Attorney General Janet Reno and Kohl concerning the situation.

He called on the two governments to investigate whether any of the former soldiers living in the United States were Nazi war criminals.

"Although it is the policy of Germany to take care of its wounded veterans, many of these same veterans could potentially be war criminals," Ackerman wrote in a Feb. 4 letter to Clinton.

"This is outrageous, particularly since many Holocaust survivors receive little, if any, reparations from Germany." □

Wiesenthal Center asks Vatican to cancel discriminatory stamp

By Ruth E. Gruber

ROME (JTA) — The Vatican is saying that it intended no offense to Jews when the Vatican Post Office issued a stamp that depicts Jews wearing the pointed hats of the medieval ghetto.

"I can assure you that no lack of respect was intended in the choice of the stamp in question," a Vatican spokesman said.

"It is part of a series of miniatures from the 13th century," he said.

"In one of them, the artist showed Jesus speaking to a group of people and portrayed listeners wearing headgear that identified them as Jews."

The Paris office of the Simon Wiesenthal Center last month asked the Vatican to withdraw the 2,500 lire, or \$1.50, stamp.

The Wiesenthal office said the stamp encouraged anti-Semitic prejudice and violated the standards of the Universal Postal Union.

A letter from the Wiesenthal Center to the Vatican Commission on Judaism said the headgear was "discriminatory and the direct precursor to the Nazi yellow star" which Jews were made to wear during World War II. □