



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ A long-awaited U.S. government report about Swiss wartime financial dealings with the Nazis will be released Wednesday, the State Department said. Sources familiar with the report say it will indicate that gold looted by the Nazis from Holocaust victims was subsequently purchased by Swiss banks and was never accounted for after World War II.

■ The Swiss security guard fired for saving wartime documents from a bank's shredder asked the Senate Banking Committee to protect his family, which he said has been threatened. After testifying in Washington, Christoph Meili said he is weighing an offer to come to the United States to work for World Jewish Congress President Edgar Bronfman.

■ The New York State Court of Appeals ruled that the creation of a public school district in the Satmar community of Kiryas Joel is unconstitutional. Orthodox groups are expected to appeal the decision before the U.S. Supreme Court.

■ A meeting between Israeli President Ezer Weizman and Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat produced no concrete results. The meeting was aimed at breaking the impasse in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. [Page 1]

■ Israeli troops forcibly removed about 50 settlers from what were described as three illegally built homes near the West Bank town of Nablus. The troops then demolished the homes. [Page 4]

■ More than 2,000 Jewish demonstrators gathered in Montreal to call on the Canadian government to take swift action against alleged Nazi war criminals living openly in the country. The protest came in the wake of recent disclosures that there are hundreds of suspected Nazi veterans living in Canada.

■ Palestinians who sell land to Israelis through unauthorized agents will face the death penalty, Palestinian Justice Minister Freih Abu Medein announced. The Palestinian Authority adopted the measure in an effort to thwart the expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Latest efforts to revive peace unlikely to have immediate impact

By David Landau

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A meeting this week between President Ezer Weizman and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat represented the latest effort to restore some forward movement to a Middle East dangerously adrift.

Tuesday's meeting came against a backdrop of growing concern that the rudderlessness that has beset the Israeli-Palestinian peace process may be giving way to an ominous lurch that could wreck all hope of resuming negotiations.

At the same time, U.S. Middle East peace envoy Dennis Ross was due in the region later in the week to attempt to break the two-month-old impasse between Israel and the Palestinians.

But it is not at all clear that any of these efforts will succeed in reviving the beleaguered relations, which also have extended to Israel's other Arab neighbors.

Weizman termed the meeting with Arafat an "icebreaking" effort and said it had been "largely successful." He said a "supply convoy will follow in the wake of the icebreaker" — apparently a reference to several gestures that the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is prepared to make to the Palestinian Authority with the hope of improving the atmosphere.

But when it came to concrete developments, Weizman and Arafat had little to announce. The Palestinian leader spoke of his "absolute commitment" to security for both sides.

Weizman said he hoped to see the two sides resume security cooperation "within a few days." If that happens, it would indeed signal a first ray of light since the two sides stopped sharing intelligence information — and broke off their negotiations — in mid-March.

The impasse developed when Israel began construction of a Jewish neighborhood at Har Homa, in southeastern Jerusalem, a part of an area that the Palestinians envision as the capital of their future state. Three days later, a Hamas suicide bombing at a Tel Aviv cafe killed three Israelis.

Headlong rush toward trouble

At the Prime Minister's Office in Jerusalem, officials said mid-week that neither the Weizman-Arafat meeting nor the Ross shuttle were likely to bring about a resumption of the peace process.

At the same time, the relationship between Israel and its Arab neighbors is deteriorating. This headlong rush toward trouble — atmospheric as much as substantive — involved the following developments:

- A sharp and bitter conflict between Israel and Jordan over water allocation.

Under the terms of the two countries' 1994 peace treaty, Israel was to supply large quantities of water to Jordan. But talks this week involving Jordanian officials and Infrastructure Minister Ariel Sharon ended in deadlock. As a result, Crown Prince Hassan and other top Jordanian officials abruptly canceled their participation at a ceremony Tuesday to inaugurate a memorial site on the two countries' border for the seven Israeli schoolgirls killed March 13 by a Jordanian soldier.

Netanyahu was to have conferred with Hassan at the site, thereby demonstrating that not all top-level dialogue in the region is at a standstill.

King Hussein, meanwhile, was in Oman, where he was expected to try to persuade the Persian Gulf state's ruler, Sultan Qaboos Bin Said, not to break off diplomatic ties with Israel. That mission, too, could be in jeopardy.

- Growing signs of a reconciliation between Egypt and Iran, a worrying development for Israel.

On Tuesday, Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati visited Egypt and invited President Hosni Mubarak to attend an Islamic summit in Iran later this year — this despite the rupture in diplomatic relations between the two countries. Both sides said the talks were "constructive."

- Growing concern in Israel over Syria's ability to arm its surface-to-surface missiles with deadly VX nerve gas.

This development was first made public by Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai six months ago. But this week, the Israeli daily Ha'aretz disclosed

more information regarding Syria's manufacturing capacity, and pointed to the inadequacy of Israel's civil defense to provide protection against the nerve gas.

Last week, during a meeting with Mubarak at the Sinai resort of Sharm el-Sheik, Syrian President Hafez Assad declared that Damascus would not abandon its chemical weapons unless Israel destroyed its nuclear option.

His statement, aimed at demonstrating a strategic parity between the two states, has further raised tensions between Israel and Syria, whose peace negotiations have been suspended for more than a year.

While there is nothing dramatically new or immediately alarming in any of these developments, taken together they constitute a worsening of the already tense atmosphere between Israel and its Arab neighbors.

Netanyahu, who has gone from crisis to crisis since assuming office last year, could dearly do with some encouraging news on the peace front.

His planned confidence-building gestures are designed to give new impetus to the Israeli-Palestinian relationship. These gestures include a plan for building Palestinian housing alongside the planned Jewish quarter at Har Homa.

In addition, Netanyahu reportedly intends to persuade the Palestinians that he is serious about quickening the timetable for permanent-status talks.

Further gestures are expected to include expedited arrangements to allow the Palestinians to operate a seaport and airport in the Gaza Strip, and progress on the issue of establishing a safe-passage route for Palestinians traveling between Gaza and the West Bank.

Weizman told reporters after his meeting with Arafat that he hoped Netanyahu would meet the Palestinian leader in the near future.

But sources in Netanyahu's office were quoted as saying that they attached little hope to Weizman's effort.

They spoke of the need for more time to elapse before the peace process returns to life.

Increasingly, though, observers are wondering whether the passage of time is a commodity that the process — and the protagonists — can afford. □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

FDR memorial revives debate over U.S. efforts in World War II

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON (JTA) — For “plucking the Jewish remnants from the fires and ovens of destruction,” President Franklin D. Roosevelt “will forever have a special place in our hearts.”

With these words, Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein closed the dedication of the FDR memorial here last week and opened a new chapter in the controversy over whether America did enough to stop the Holocaust.

Since the publication of World War II-era correspondence in the 1970s that details American intelligence about the slaughter of Europe's Jews, a debate has raged over FDR's actions or non-actions during the war.

Many historians, citing David Wyman's book, “The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust,” argue that the United States stood by and watched as Hitler's troops killed 6 million Jews.

Others believe that FDR thought that the best way to help the Jews was to win the war as quickly as possible. And, of course, many believe that the truth lies somewhere in the middle.

In the days after his invocation last Friday, Eckstein, the president of the Center for Jewish and Christian Values, apologized for a news release that declared his

presence on the podium as a symbol of “Jewish support for FDR's work on behalf of Jews during World War II.”

Instead the invocation was meant to support FDR for “his obsessive commitment to end the war,” Eckstein said in a telephone interview.

“As we say on Passover, ‘Had God not taken our forefathers out of Egypt, then we would still be slaves unto Pharaoh,’ ” Eckstein said. “Without FDR, many more would have died at Hitler's hands.”

Eckstein, who has come down squarely on the side that FDR in no way abandoned the Jews, said he had “struggled” to come to that position.

But others continue to fault FDR, arguing that he should have ordered a bombing campaign of Auschwitz, eased immigration quotas and spoken out to signal to Hitler that the United States cared about the fate of the Jews.

“Franklin Roosevelt's indifference to so momentous an historical event as the systematic annihilation of European Jewry emerges as the worst failure of his presidency,” Wyman wrote in the preface to his book.

Elie Wiesel has joined the criticism of FDR.

“Proud as we are of the generosity that America showed in fighting against Nazi Germany, we are embarrassed and dismayed by its behavior toward Hitler's Jewish victims,” the survivor and Nobel laureate wrote in an introduction to Wyman's book.

“The destiny of persecuted Jews carried too little weight to tip the scales in their favor,” Wiesel wrote. “How else [to] explain the semi-indifference of an FDR faced with the agony of European Jewry?”

At last week's event, a handful of protesters from the Florida-based Shalom International protested the monument's opening. “We're not going to stand for this charade. FDR is the biggest phony,” said the group's president, Robert Kunst.

'All countries did not do enough'

But supporters of FDR lined up to defend his wartime policies. “I deeply regret and even resent some of the careless language people use to talk about Roosevelt,” said Hyman Bookbinder, director emeritus of the American Jewish Committee's Washington office.

“All countries did not do enough; the Jewish community did not do enough; the Zionists did not do enough,” said Bookbinder who, like 80 percent of American Jews, voted for FDR in his 1944 presidential reelection.

Bookbinder, who lost all but one of his 80 Polish relatives in the Holocaust, planned to lead delegates from the AJCommittee's annual meeting here through the monument this week.

“All of Roosevelt's positives must not be and should not be contradicted by an easy, simplistic idea that he could have saved the Jews,” Bookbinder said he planned to tell the group.

Bookbinder, now a member of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum's Commission on Conscience, served in the Navy when, he said, “my commander-in-chief died.”

Visitors to the monument will know of no controversy over FDR and the Holocaust. The sprawling monument in the shadows of the cherry trees that line the Tidal Basin makes no reference to the Holocaust.

That is why Bookbinder said he will point out to the AJCommittee group that the Holocaust museum lies only a few blocks from the monument.

“We need to recognize the connection between the two,” Bookbinder said. “It was Roosevelt who made it possible to end the Holocaust and the conditions that the Jews were facing.”

After a pause, he added, “That does not mean that we have nothing but praise.” □

Two Jewish groups merge amid alarm over flagging peace process

By Cynthia Mann

NEW YORK (JTA) — Two American Jewish organizations promoting the Middle East peace process have decided to merge amid their growing alarm that the process is unraveling.

The Israel Policy Forum, based in New York, and Project Nishma, in Washington, D.C., will come together, beginning next month, under the IPF name.

Together, their leaders say, they can work more effectively to help "salvage" the peace effort. Both believe that the United States must play a central role in mediating and resolving the conflict. The merger is the latest change in the landscape of an organized Jewry still grappling with the shift in policies around the peace process adopted by the Likud-led government of Benjamin Netanyahu.

Groups most closely identified with the policies of the previous Labor-led government — including IPF, Project Nishma and Americans for Peace Now, which recently brought on a new executive director — have had to make the biggest adjustment.

"Concern that the peace process was falling apart caused leaders of both organizations to try to figure out a way to strengthen our efforts so that would not happen," said Theodore Mann, the co-chair of Nishma since its founding nine years ago. He will become the merged group's new executive committee chair.

Healthy and logical move

Both insiders and observers say the move is a healthy and logical one, given the similarity of the two groups' outlooks and missions.

IPF has focused mostly on polling of American Jewish attitudes and analyzing the peace process from an economic point of view, said Jonathan Jacoby, the IPF executive vice president who will remain the top professional at the newly configured entity.

By merging with Nishma, he said, IPF will expand its programming on Israeli security matters, Nishma's longtime expertise.

"We are not a lobby and are not planning to become a lobby," he added.

Tom Smerling, the current executive director of Nishma, will head the IPF Washington office and be second in charge.

He said the primary mission of the new IPF will be "to educate Jewish opinion leaders about the security and economic benefits of the peace process, and make sure the American government knows the majority of American Jews support American diplomatic leadership in resolving the current crisis."

When asked how far his new group would go in criticizing Israeli government policy when it believed it did not serve the peace process, Smerling said the new organization would be "concerned" about any steps by any parties that "tend to erode trust and confidence building."

But, he added, "commenting on the policies of the Israeli government is not our focus."

As for endorsing a U.S. Middle East policy when it is at odds with Israel, Smerling said a "top priority" is ensuring a close U.S.-Israel relationship is "unwavering."

Still, Nishma issued a statement recently defending President Clinton for comments he made criticizing Israel's construction of Har Homa, the Jewish housing site in the southeastern portion of Jerusalem.

The group thereby departed from the position of many Jewish organizations, which had attacked Clinton for his criticism.

In a joint statement explaining the merger, Mann

and New York businessman Michael Sonnenfeldt, who is and will remain the IPF chair, said, "In recent months, that crisis has prompted many prominent American Jews to step forward — some for the first time — and ask what role they can play to ensure that the promise" of peace is not lost.

The new IPF aims to help them. Smerling said it will "give a voice to the untapped silent majority" of American Jews who, surveys show, support the peace process and favor an active U.S. role in that process. The message will be disseminated through policy analysis, scholarly papers, briefings and the media, he said.

A harbinger of the merger appeared in recent newspaper ads published under both names. The ad lauded the U.S. government for its efforts to help broker an enduring settlement that would "ensure Israel's security, prosperity and well-being."

The more than 100 signatories included prominent names in business, philanthropy and the Jewish organizational world, many of whom will sit on the group's board and advisory councils.

Mann, a Philadelphia attorney, is a former chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations and a past president of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry.

Observers say the merger reflects a union of two organizations with disparate styles. They say IPF's "heavy hitters" in U.S. and Israeli business who are outside the Jewish organizational mainstream, and its connections with the U.S. administration, will complement Nishma, which has been known for more outspoken political stands, but has been limited by lack of resources.

Some say changes for IPF were inevitable after the Labor government lost the elections in Israel last May. IPF's stock in trade had been its close relationship with that government and it tried hard to reposition itself as non-partisan after Labor lost.

Gail Pressberg, a consultant for Americans for Peace Now, said the consolidation "makes a lot of sense."

APN, also a vocal supporter of the peace process, has recently gone through its own staff changes.

Debra DeLee, former chairwoman of the Democratic National Committee and a longtime labor organizer, was named executive director, succeeding Gary Rubin. □

U.S. to deport Michigan man who served as Nazi SS guard

NEW YORK (JTA) — The U.S. Department of Justice has won a court order of deportation against a Michigan man who served as an armed Waffen SS guard at Auschwitz and Sachsenhausen concentration camps during World War II.

Chief U.S. Immigration Judge Michael Creppy found that Ferdinand Hammer, 75, participated in persecuting persons because of race, religion, national origin or political opinion. In ordering Hammer's deportation, Creppy cited German documents that confirmed his service in the Waffen SS at Auschwitz and Sachsenhausen, and on prisoner transports between the two camps.

Hammer will be deported to Croatia.

"This is a significant victory," Eli Rosenbaum, director of the Justice Department's Office of Special Investigations, said in a statement.

"The ruling reaffirms that those who helped the Nazis carry out their programs of murder and oppression may not claim the privilege of U.S. residence."

Last May, the U.S. District Court in Detroit stripped Hammer of his U.S. citizenship on the grounds that the retired foundry supervisor lied about his wartime past when he applied for naturalization in 1963. □

Reform asks court to recognize conversions of adopted infants*By Michele Chabin*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The Reform movement's decision to petition the High Court this week to recognize the Jewishness of two infants who were adopted and converted abroad could further strain Israeli-Diaspora relations, according to a senior aide to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

"In our recent meetings with leaders of the Reform and Conservative movements, as well as with members of the religious camp in Israel, we asked everyone to try as much as possible to tone down the rhetoric and to lower the heat," said Bobby Brown, the premier's adviser on Diaspora affairs.

Tensions between the Orthodox and liberal religious movements have escalated in the wake of preliminary Knesset approval last month of a bill that would cement in law the Orthodox Chief Rabbinate's exclusive control over conversions performed in Israel.

The proposed legislation would not affect the long-standing practice of recognizing conversions conducted abroad. The legislative process has been suspended to allow for a possible compromise to be negotiated.

Government officials have suggested that the Reform and Conservative movements cease litigation on conversion matters in exchange for an end to the controversial Knesset measure.

But Reform and Conservative leaders in Israel have vowed to continue pursuing legal actions.

Brown stressed that the Reform petition, which was being filed on behalf of two Israeli couples, "in no way violates" any understandings reached between representatives of the Israeli government and Diaspora leaders during a series of meetings in Washington and New York last month. But he added that "anything done on either side to heat up the issue makes it harder to come to mutually acceptable conclusions."

Uri Regev, director of the Reform movement's Israel Religious Action Center, defended the movement's decision to petition the court. He said that until last May's elections, the Interior Ministry routinely registered children who were adopted and converted abroad as Jewish.

"It stopped this practice under pressure from religious members of the government," Regev said. "We are simply petitioning the government to do what it is legally required to do."

Regev charged that Netanyahu "is trying to convince American Jews that the conversion issue only relates to the conversion of Israelis, but that's not the case here." □

Deported Hamas leader in Jordan: No more terror against civilians

NEW YORK (JTA) — Shortly after his arrival in Jordan, Hamas leader Mousa Mohammed Abu Marzook said his organization would no longer target Israeli civilians for terrorist attacks.

At the same time, he vowed to resume his own struggle against what he termed Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories. "I have a long way to go in serving my people and helping them achieve their hopes and aspirations," he was quoted as saying.

If the Palestinians cannot win their rights through peace, he added, "we don't have any option except to fight for our future."

Marzook made the comments at a news conference in Amman on Tuesday, one day after it was announced that the United States had deported him.

He had been detained in a New York jail since July 1995 on suspicion of being a terrorist.

In an unusual deal, Jordan agreed to accept Marzook as a humanitarian gesture after Israel dropped its request to have him extradited.

Marzook, who gave up his U.S. residency under the deal, said he believed that Israel decided it had no evidence to support its charges that he helped orchestrate terrorist attacks that killed 47 people.

The Hamas military wing has claimed credit for the series of attacks.

Marzook has said he was only a political leader and fund raiser for the group, and that his detention was politically motivated.

Israel apparently dropped the request for fear that putting him on trial would inflame tensions in the region and spur Palestinian violence.

An Israeli official said the deportation to Jordan "seemed one of the most convenient" ways to resolve the case.

"We trust that King Hussein will know how to contain Abu Marzook's activities," said the official, who asked not to be identified.

There has been speculation that the United States' decision to deport him to Jordan came with certain conditions.

But Marzook said he "categorically rejected" conditions such "as abandoning political activities and condemning the actions that are carried out by my Palestinian brethren" against Israel.

Marzook had been a U.S. resident for 15 years when he was detained at a New York airport because his name was on a list of suspected terrorists. □

Coalition members protest razing of West Bank homes*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Right-wing coalition members threatened to quit the government this week after Israeli security forces demolished what were described as three illegally built homes near the West Bank town of Nablus.

After destroying two of the homes Tuesday, the forces dragged about 50 Jewish settlers, half of them children, from the third structure, which they also demolished with a bulldozer.

Police said 18 settlers were arrested. Five police officers, three children and one adult settler were injured.

Representatives from the settlement of Yizhar said the structures were built two years ago, but Israeli officials said they were set up only several months ago without permits.

A spokesman for the Civil Administration in the West Bank said the demolitions took place only after the settlers had lost their appeals.

Tuesday's action drew an angry response from some coalition members, who threatened to withdraw support for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu if it were proven that his government had authorized the demolition of the structures.

Agriculture Minister Rafael Eitan, of the right-wing Tsomet Party, said that even if the buildings were illegal, the action was unjustified in light of what he described as unhindered illegal construction by Arabs in the West Bank.

Knesset member Shaul Yahalom of the National Religious Party said he would have to ponder whether he could support a government that acted in such a manner.

"How do you think the whole settlement movement started?" he said, adding that it was through mobile homes "that were placed on top of hills." □