



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ Israeli and Palestinian negotiators met in Cairo to discuss ways to break a deadlock in stalled peace talks. Israel earlier threatened to call off the meeting until the Palestinians retracted a senior Palestinian official's remarks that Israel had agreed to halt settlement building. [Page 2]

■ The World Jewish Restitution Organization and the Swiss Bankers Association agreed to set up an independent panel to handle requests from Holocaust survivors or their heirs to locate dormant bank accounts. [Page 3]

■ Poland's Jewish community endorsed the former Communist nation's bid to join NATO, saying that membership in the alliance will improve the situation of Polish Jews. [Page 3]

■ The board of the United Israel Appeal approved a resolution that would double the Jewish Agency for Israel's direct funding of modern Orthodox, Conservative and Reform programs in Israel. The resolution, which would bring such funding to \$5 million, will be voted on later this month at the agency's annual assembly. The agency announced it will establish a new department to promote pluralism and Reform and Conservative Judaism.

■ The Anti-Defamation League praised U.S. President Clinton's call for an "all out assault on hate crimes." During his weekly radio address, Clinton called hate crimes "an act against America" and announced that he will hold a conference on hate crimes in November.

■ Three Pennsylvania teen-agers who smashed a menorah last December were ordered to watch "Schindler's List," write an essay on anti-Semitism and perform community service in lieu of a jail sentence. The vandalism prompted the victims' Christian neighbors to display menorahs in their windows during Chanukah.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Senate seen as key to save deal on renewing immigrant benefits

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Jewish activists are vowing a vigorous fight to restore federal benefits to immigrants after House Republicans retreated from a budget deal that would renew certain assistance eliminated by the welfare reform law.

At the same time, the pending expiration of legislation that eases entry for refugees from the former Soviet Union has raised concerns among Soviet Jewry advocates, who fear that Congress may not renew the Lautenberg Amendment.

The landmark welfare reform law enacted last year cut nearly all federal aid to legal immigrants who are not citizens. President Clinton recently won concessions in negotiations with congressional leaders to "fix" the law. But a House panel last week altered the terms of a budget agreement struck between Congress and the White House.

Under that painstakingly negotiated deal, disabled legal immigrants who were in the United States before the welfare measure became law last August, as well as those who become disabled in the future, could continue receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Medicaid.

The new proposal, advanced by Rep. Clay Shaw (R-Fla.) and adopted by a House Ways and Means subcommittee, would extend SSI to immigrants — including the elderly poor — who were on the rolls as of Aug. 22, 1996.

But immigrants who were not on the rolls by that date would not be eligible for assistance even if they become disabled in the future.

Republicans argue that the new proposal is an improvement over the budget deal because it guarantees aid to elderly, poor immigrants already receiving social security checks.

"No way am I going to back off on this," said Shaw, chairman of the subcommittee. "I'm going to stick with this come hell or high water. What the administration is arguing is cruel."

But the Clinton administration and congressional Democrats, backed by most Jewish groups, said the new Republican plan would cover far fewer immigrants than the budget agreement.

In a letter to Shaw, the White House accused Republicans of abandoning the most vulnerable immigrants, while also arguing that the new plan would protect 75,000 fewer immigrants over five years than the budget agreement.

'It's a bait and switch'

Jewish immigrant advocates, for their part, expressed outrage at the legislative move.

"It's a bait and switch and a scaling back of the agreement," said Diana Aviv, director of the Washington Action Office of the Council of Jewish Federations.

"It looks to me like we practically have to go back to square one," said Micah Naftalin, national director of the Union of Council for Soviet Jews.

"What we're talking about here is half a million or more elderly immigrants of many nationalities who are going to be homeless" as a result of the new welfare law.

The Union of Councils staged a Capitol Hill rally earlier this year to draw attention to the plight of immigrants. Last week, the group delivered a petition to Congress containing 100,000 signatures urging lawmakers to restore immigrant benefits.

Immigrant advocates face a tough battle in trying to mitigate the impact of the welfare law, particularly since the "fix" the White House negotiated only amounted to a partial reprieve to begin with.

Even if Congress approves all aspects of the budget agreement, the Jewish social service system will face a multimillion dollar crisis when poor, elderly immigrants who have not become U.S. citizens — including tens of thousands of Jews from the former Soviet Union — begin to lose federal support in August.

Immigrant advocates are now turning their attention to the Senate,

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where they believe the budget accord, together with efforts to restore certain welfare benefits, will fare better.

The Senate has already adopted a non-binding resolution declaring that "elderly and disabled legal immigrants who are unable to work should receive assistance essential to their well-being" — a move that has given some immigrant advocates reason for cautious optimism.

Moreover, Aviv of CJF said she sees "real movement," given that the fight does not appear to be over whether to restore benefits, but over how a chunk of money can best be spent to benefit legal immigrants.

"We will try to get as many fixes as possible under the circumstances," she said.

Amid the haggling over the budget deal, Jewish activists have also found themselves scrambling to protect Jewish immigrants on another front.

The House, citing budgetary concerns, dropped a provision from its foreign operations authorization bill last week that allows Jews and members of other persecuted groups to enter the United States as refugees under eased criteria.

The provision, known as the Lautenberg Amendment, was enacted in 1990 under the sponsorship of Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.) in response to growing concerns about the potential for an anti-Semitic backlash in the wake of the Soviet Union's demise.

Under the law, historically persecuted groups seeking refuge in the United States, including Jews and evangelical Christians, only have to show a "credible basis for concern" about the possibility of persecution instead of having to prove "well-founded fears," as is the case with other refugees.

The legislation, which expires in October, has enjoyed strong support over the years. It passed both houses last year by wide margins.

But last week the House Rules Committee deleted the measure, citing a study by the Congressional Budget Office which claimed for the first time that the amendment would add hundreds of millions of dollars to the federal budget in coming years.

Jewish immigration advocates were quick to lambaste the move, dismissing the budgetary concerns as "bogus."

'The devil is in the details'

The House action "takes direct aim at the Soviet Jewry movement," said Naftalin of the Union of Councils. "This is war for us."

Aviv of CJF took a softer stance, saying the House action was based on an "erroneous interpretation" of the law. She expressed confidence that the measure will prevail.

"This is a very good example of how the devil is in the details and how it is possible to wipe out programs through bureaucratic maneuvers," she said. "We believe the Senate will be more sympathetic."

The uncertainty surrounding renewal of the refugee provision comes as a congressionally-appointed commission called on the White House to take charge of immigration and refugee policies and criticized key measures of a new law.

In its annual report to Congress, the bipartisan U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform called for "immediate correction" of measures in an immigration law Congress passed last year that it said could wrongly return refugees to face persecution or death.

The commission said provisions of the new law aimed at curbing abuse of the asylum system could harm people with bona fide claims and undermine efficiency of the system. □

Egypt hosts meeting to renew Israeli-Palestinian peace talks

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli and Palestinian negotiators met this week for the first time in nearly three months.

But a last-minute crisis almost threatened to cancel the talks.

Israeli officials said they would not attend the meeting after a spokesman for Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat, Marwan Kanafani, said that Israel had agreed to stop all settlement construction as a precondition to holding Sunday's talks in Cairo.

Israel delayed the departure of its delegation to Cairo until the Palestinian delegation issued a statement saying that there had been a misunderstanding regarding Kanafani's remarks and that there had been no agreement regarding Israeli construction projects.

Officials from both sides said they did not expect a breakthrough from Sunday's talks.

They said they had agreed to attend the meeting in deference to a recent Egyptian initiative to break the deadlock and resume the peace process.

After Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak met last month, Mubarak's adviser, Osama Al-Baz, has been shuttling between Netanyahu and Arafat, conveying various proposals for renewing the talks.

Egyptian Foreign Minister Amre Moussa said this weekend that Sunday's meeting had been called to discuss details of a formula drawn up by the Egyptians to renew the negotiations.

According to news reports, the Egyptian program was based on five points:

- Israel would avoid taking unilateral steps in Jerusalem;
- Israel would call for a temporary freeze on settlement activity;
- the Palestinian Authority would issue a verbal pledge to ensure Israeli security;
- Israel would issue a verbal commitment to implement all aspects of the Hebron accord, including the opening of a Palestinian airport and seaport in the Gaza Strip, and the opening of a safe passage route for Palestinians traveling between the West Bank and Gaza; and
- both sides would agree to start the final-status negotiations. □

Israeli Labor Party secretary resigns

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli Labor Party secretary Nissim Zvilli has resigned.

The move last week came two days after Ehud Barak was elected chairman of the Labor Party.

Zvilli announced his plans to step down last month, after the Labor Party convention rejected his proposal to create the honorary title of president for outgoing party leader Shimon Peres.

Zvilli said at the time that he felt the spirit of camaraderie in the party had been lost and had been replaced by the political ambitions of individuals.

After a brief meeting last week with Barak, Zvilli said he had recommended to the new chairman not to abolish the position of party secretary.

Zvilli warned it would be akin to abandoning the local party branches.

He said Barak did not tell him whether he intended to call elections for a new party secretary or abolish the title and appoint an administrative manager. □

Independent panel to handle claims on Swiss bank accounts*By Fredy Rom*

JERUSALEM, June 8 (JTA) — Jewish groups and Swiss banks have taken a significant step toward returning the assets from unclaimed accounts that were opened by Jews fleeing Nazi persecution.

The World Jewish Restitution Organization and the Swiss Bankers Association agreed to set up an independent panel to handle requests from Holocaust survivors or their heirs to locate the dormant bank accounts.

The move announced last week represents the first time that Swiss banks have agreed to give an independent body the power to restore the missing accounts to their rightful owners.

The number of such accounts has been widely disputed by Jewish leaders and Swiss banking officials.

Avraham Burg, chairman of the Jewish Agency for Israel, said in an interview here last week that there were 20,000 such accounts.

Hanspeter Hani, the ombudsman appointed by the Swiss Bank Association to handle claims against the dormant accounts, called Burg's figure "nonsense."

The new independent panel that will handle the claims was announced by former Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volcker during a special session last week of the Israeli Knesset's Committee for the Restitution of Jewish Property.

Volcker heads the Independent Commission of Eminent Persons, which was created by the WJRO and the Swiss Bankers Association in May 1996 to investigate the missing accounts.

Volcker said the panel would seek to match claims by Holocaust survivors or their heirs with assets uncovered during bank audits.

Elan Steinberg, executive director of the World Jewish Congress, called this procedure "a conceptual breakthrough" that would allow individual claimants to bypass the Swiss bank ombudsman, who had previously charged a hefty fee to investigate a claim.

Panel to use lenient rules

The Volcker Commission decided to appoint three judges to the panel, one each from the United States, Switzerland and Israel.

The panel is expected to use lenient rules of evidence because of the difficulties that claimants have with presenting documents in connection with the accounts, which were opened more than 50 years ago.

In the past, the Swiss banks' strict secrecy laws effectively blocked claimants from recovering assets from the long-dormant accounts.

The Volcker Commission also decided to allow the petitioners and their legal representatives to appear before the panel to present their claims. No similar mechanism was established for Swiss bank officials to counter those claims. The decisions will be final, according to the commission, which said there will be no right of appeal.

Swiss banks will immediately have to pay claimants any sums decided on by the panel, but the banks will be then be free of any future liability related to the claims, the commission said.

To facilitate the claims process, the names of dormant accounts that have been discovered will be made public through the media, the Internet and ads that will be published in a number of countries.

Toll-free numbers will also be set up to handle questions from potential claimants.

The Swiss banks have agreed to pay the costs of disseminating information about dormant accounts.

The Volcker Commission worked successfully at getting bank secrecy laws lifted so that the names on the dormant accounts could be published.

At last week's special session of the Knesset restitution committee, the Volcker Commission also announced that five Swiss banks would soon be audited as part of its search for unclaimed bank accounts. □

Jewish community endorses Poland's quest to join NATO*By Ruth E. Gruber*

VIENNA (JTA) — Poland's Jewish community has endorsed Poland's bid to join NATO, saying its inclusion within the alliance would help the situation of Polish Jews.

"We believe that Poland's entry to NATO serves the interests of our country and of all its citizens, including Polish Jews," Jerzy Kichler, the newly elected president of the Union of Jewish Communities in Poland, said in a statement last Friday.

"It can only improve the situation of Jews in Poland," the statement added.

The statement reflects the view that NATO membership, by linking Poland more firmly with the West, would strengthen democracy and democratic values in the former Communist state, including human rights and respect for ethnic and religious minorities.

This view is opposed by some members of the World Jewish Restitution Organization, who believe that Jewish support for Poland's membership in NATO should be linked to the Warsaw government's handling of property restitution to the country's Jews.

Kichler held a brief, informal meeting with Pope John Paul II last week during a large ecumenical meeting in the southwestern city of Wroclaw at the beginning of the pope's 11-day visit to his native Poland. Two other leaders of the Wroclaw Jewish community also met with the pope.

The pope did not schedule any formal meetings with Jewish community leaders during his trip. □

Campaign launched to rescind Palestinian leader's Nobel Prize*By Tom Tugend*

LOS ANGELES, June 8 (JTA) — The Simon Wiesenthal Center is launching an international campaign aimed at stripping Yasser Arafat of the Nobel Peace Prize he won in 1994.

The Palestinian leader shared the award with then Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres for their joint efforts toward Middle East peace through the 1993 Israeli-Palestinian accords.

"The recent policy of Arafat's Palestinian Authority in issuing a death sentence against anyone selling Palestinian land to a Jew — a decision embraced by Arafat himself — makes a mockery of the Nobel Peace Prize conferred upon him," Rabbi Marvin Hier, founder of the Wiesenthal Center, wrote to Francis Sejersted, chairman of the Nobel Peace Prize Committee.

Israel has accused the Palestinian Authority of direct responsibility for the recent murders of three Arab land dealers. Palestinian officials have said that such land sales are crimes punishable by death, but they have sharply denied any involvement in the slayings.

"Sanctioning the murder without trial of individuals," wrote Hier, "is a form of behavior reminiscent of the Dark Ages and reeks of the anti-Semitism invoked by the Nazis."

Hier said he will call upon human rights organizations and advocates of democracy throughout the world to join his campaign. □

FOCUS ON ISSUES**College students merge Jewish identity with the written word***By Franci Levine Grater*

NEW YORK (JTA) — For anyone who thinks that North American Jewish college students are apathetic, check out the proliferation of Jewish publications springing up on campuses across the continent.

Through newspapers, magazines and literary journals, Jewish students are joining together to explore and express their Jewish identity through the written word.

Thirty of the editors and writers behind this flourish of Jewish publications — some 40 exist around the country — gathered here recently for a conference of the Jewish Student Press Service.

The students came to attend seminars with professionals working in the Jewish media and to share with one another the challenges they face running their own periodicals.

The two-day conference, held May 28 and 29 at the newly opened Bronfman Center for Jewish Student Life at New York University, was the most well-attended since the activist period of the 1970s, according to Mik Moore, JSPS national director.

The purpose of the conference, Moore said, was “to expose students to the current issues in Jewish media, help them improve their technical skills and make them aware of the scope of the professional field.”

Moore, who co-founded the Jewish journal *Ra’ashan* while a student at Vassar, said he hopes to inspire promising students to consider Jewish print media as a career focus.

Well-known Jewish journalists, magazine editors and writers — including Debra Nussbaum Cohen, Jewish Telegraphic Agency staff writer; Leonard Fein, author and founder of *Moment* magazine; J.J. Goldberg, author and journalist; Blu Greenberg, feminist thinker and writer; Lisa Hostein, JTA editor; Letty Cottin Pogrebin, a founder of *Ms.* magazine; Gary Rosenblatt, editor of the *New York Jewish Week*; and Susan Weidman Schneider, editor of *Lilith* magazine — were among the many professionals who interacted with the students to discuss relevant issues such as journalistic responsibility and what makes art or news “Jewish.”

They also offered the attendees practical advice for soliciting articles, cultivating news sources and career advancement.

‘A great niche’

Rebecca Phillips, the editor of Columbia University’s Jewish journal, *Perspectives*, and a summer intern at the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, came away encouraged.

“It was very encouraging to encounter people who are achieving in this profession and to hear their stories, because journalism is a hard field to break into.

“Jewish journalism, in particular, is a great niche,” she said, because “you can write for a community that you know and care about, and make an important contribution.”

The students displayed a sense of energy and creativity as they shared their experiences.

In a roundtable discussion titled “Starting a Jewish Campus Publication,” several student editors told inspiring anecdotes of how they had revitalized their school’s waning Jewish publications, or started new ones where none existed.

Renee Gindi took over as editor of *New York University’s Jewish magazine, Forum*, two years ago, and is proud of the magazine’s growing contribution to the school’s Jewish life.

“We’ve doubled the number of annual issues and assembled a staff of editors and writers to insure that we have material and people to assemble it,” she said.

“Many of the Jewish students on my campus are unaffiliated, so our audience is hard to reach.

“The one tenet of *Forum* is that we provide a space for free expression. We give Jewish students who often feel disaffected a place to exchange ideas.”

In fact, many of the publications have proven to be an informal form of outreach.

“Publications have a very good effect on their campuses,” said Udi Ofer, former editor-in-chief of *ARI*, the Jewish newspaper at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

“Whole communities can develop around a good publication.

“In addition to the paper itself, *ARI* hosted events on campus which attracted a lot of students.

“It is really powerful to see how people with common interests can come together so quickly,” Ofer added.

Brooke Geldner, a student at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, founded *Soft*, an artistic/literary magazine.

She solicits submissions for the magazine from Jewish students on campus almost entirely by e-mail.

“I wanted to specifically target Jewish artists and writers who were not already active in Hillel to showcase the vast Jewish talent on campus, and to reveal that we are united both creatively and culturally.

“Most of the artists who contacted me were not otherwise involved in Jewish activities on campus, and in the end they wanted to meet each other,” she said.

“*Soft* was very successful in uniting that segment of the school’s Jewish population.”

For Noah Dauber, editor of Harvard University’s *Mosaic*, the complexities of American Jewish life provide material for the journal’s intellectual discourse.

Another conference attendee, Kate Kotler, edits a burgeoning Jewish newsletter at the University of Akron, Ohio.

Hers is a complex task that includes identifying Jewish news and galvanizing a small Jewish community on a large campus.

Providing a vital forum

Ofer emphasized the importance of the JSPS in all of their work.

“Like a news service,” he said, the JSPS offers “a supply of articles when a Jewish publication is running short, but more importantly they are a network for all of us throughout the year.

“It is great to know that I can reach out to editors at other campuses to discuss ideas and problems.”

For now, the student editors provide a vital forum for the Jewish students at their colleges to connect as a community and exchange ideas.

As they look to the future, many of them said they were so motivated by the conference that they hope to continue the synthesis of Jewish community and the printed word in their professional lives.

Among those at the conference’s final session was Shira Levine, a freshman at James Madison University, in Harrisonburg, Virginia.

“I came here as a journalist — the “Judaism” part of the conference was just a bonus for me.

“Now, I am leaving here as a Jewish journalist,” Levine added. □

(Franci Levine Grater, who attended the JSPS conference, is a graduate of the University of Judaism. She is currently a freelance writer in New York City.)