

NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ **Israeli Communications Minister Limor Livnat stepped down as the Cabinet's liaison to the Knesset, saying she could no longer defend the government's policies.** Her resignation comes as cracks are emerging in the coalition ahead of Knesset action on a no-confidence motion that could force elections. [Page 3]

■ **Representatives of the Israeli government and the Conservative and Reform movements signed an accord aimed at resolving the controversy over pending conversion legislation.** A committee comprised of representatives from the main streams of Judaism will try to reach an understanding by Aug. 15.

■ **An Israeli thief was deemed a hero after discovering that the bag he stole from a crowded Tel Aviv beach contained a bomb.** Police called the incident an attempted terrorist attack, and said the thief's actions averted a serious disaster. [Page 2]

■ **Israel's Defense Minister warned the Palestinian Authority that more violence in the West Bank and Gaza Strip would result in Palestinian casualties.** Yitzhak Mordechai made his remarks on a tour of the West Bank town of Hebron, which was quiet Sunday after eight days of Israeli-Palestinian clashes.

■ **A leading German insurance company has named an American historian to probe the firm's wartime ties to Nazi activities.** The report on the Allianz Group, which is the target of a class-action lawsuit, is expected by 1999. [Page 4]

■ **Israel may ban the entry of about 20 Palestinian officials it blames for inciting violence in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.** Among the officials is Palestinian Justice Minister Freih Abu Medein, who has called for imposing the death penalty on Palestinians who sell land to Jews.

■ **Israel's Supreme Court outlawed alligator wrestling as a spectator sport.** The decision, which overturned an earlier Tel Aviv court decision, was hailed by animal rights activists as a great victory.

FOCUS ON ISSUES**Yiddish: Is it alive and kicking — or relegated to library research?**

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK (JTA) — Aren't sure that Yiddish is alive and kicking? "Shvitz! My Yiddishe Workout," which will have you flexing to the real oldies, wants to convince you that it is.

More Fyvush Finkel than "Buns of Steel," "Shvitz!" may claim a unique place in the annals of exercise videos by dint of the fact that its host, silver-haired actress Shifra Lerer, a star of Yiddish theater, wags a finger every few minutes and urges viewers to "sit down and rest, if you're not feeling too good."

The workouts, demonstrated to a klezmer beat and narrated in Yiddish by Lerer and two hard-body co-stars, are subtitled in English for those unversed in the mama loshen.

Does the recent appearance of "Shvitz!" indicate the revival of a Yiddish-speaking market?

Does it mean that Yiddish culture has been transformed from the historical to the contemporary?

Lovers of Yiddish are at odds over whether the phenomenon of something like "Shvitz!" is a harbinger of revitalization — or simply an exercise in kitschy nostalgia.

Some, primarily academics, say Yiddish is an important, but essentially dead, language.

The only place that the language will be carried from one generation to the next, they say, is in Chasidic shtetls such as the Brooklyn neighborhoods of Borough Park and Williamsburg.

"The best proof that Yiddish is dead is the revival of Yiddish," says David Roskies, a professor of Jewish literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary.

Yiddish is popular, he says, because it provides an easy but short-lived way for people to connect with a piece of their Jewishness.

'You can lay any trip you want to on Yiddish'

"You don't have to belong to any organization, don't have to have any ideology," he says.

You can lay any trip you want to on Yiddish and feel you're doing something authentic and meaningful."

Those who disagree say that Yiddish is by its very nature a language and culture adaptive to the larger environment in which it exists, and that a younger generation is reclaiming it today so that it will once again find a life of its own.

Still others believe that the future of Yiddish in America is unclear.

"It's very hard to know where all of this will go, and that's what makes it interesting," says Tom Freudenheim, executive director of the New York-based YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

"But it is totally unlike what anyone predicted," Freudenheim said, referring to the fact that since the 1940s, people have predicted the demise of Yiddish language and culture, yet it has never been totally extinguished. Whatever its future, the current grass-roots bloom of interest in things Yiddish — from klezmer music to the language and literature itself — is undeniable.

Yiddish seems to be providing a Jewish connection for people who have felt on the margins of legitimacy because they find no resonance in Judaism as a religion and are committed to Jewish secularism.

"It's about alienation from the Jewish religious establishment," says Alisa Solomon, a staff writer for the Village Voice who is taking a six-week Yiddish course at Columbia University.

"There's a kind of analogy people make with the marginalized status of Yiddish itself. It's an outsider stance."

Solomon, who is lesbian, also sees reclaiming Yiddish as a way for gay Jews to refuse assimilation into a larger gay subculture.

Manifestations of the renewed interest in Yiddish are everywhere:

• Klezmer music, rediscovered as musical folklore in the mid-1970s, is perhaps the most popular contact point. For many listeners the music is the

end, as well as the beginning, of interest in Yiddish, though klezmer musicians sell out some of the country's finest venues.

Bands range from the Klezmatics, likely the most popular of the bunch — which uses Yiddish tradition and simultaneously subverts it to convey radical messages on contemporary issues such as gay rights — to Kapelye, founded in 1970 by Henry Sapoznik.

Other musicians, such as John Zorn and Andy Statman, blend klezmer with jazz.

- Academic Yiddish programs at universities around the world — from New York to Austin, Texas, from Los Angeles to Oxford, England — are booming.

- Several annual festivals, like Klezcamp, Mame-Loshn and YiddishVoch, have been established within the last decade in the United States.

Each attracts hundreds of people to usually weeklong sessions where they socialize, improve their Yiddish language skills, study literature and film.

They even learn Shiatsu massage or play basketball in the mother tongue.

Last November, "the Yiddish Woodstock," formally known as the Second International Yiddish Festival, took place in Amsterdam, Holland.

Toronto will host Ashkenaz '97 from Aug. 25 to Sept. 1.

The event is a lakeside festival attended by more than 30,000 people the first time it was held, two years ago, according to its Web site (www.ashkenaz.org).

But what is this interest and energy, this ferment and fervor, really about?

Reuven Millman, who conceived and produced "Shvitz!" says that for him, the community is the thing.

Through the creation of vibrant communities of people with this shared secular interest, Yiddish culture is being rebuilt, he says.

Millman is a producer of Mame-Loshn, a festival held over Memorial Day Weekend.

This year, Mame-Loshn attracted more than 700 people to Fairfield, Conn.

"Some Yiddishists are interested in Yiddish as a dying language," he said, but "we believe Yiddish is a useful language, a language of community."

Stumbles into Yiddish at Lubavitch wedding

Millman stumbled into it five years ago when he heard the language spoken at a Lubavitch wedding.

His wife suggested he delve into the tongue of his grandparents.

"As soon as I started learning, I started meeting people who were of varied backgrounds, who were very spirited, though not necessarily spiritual, and were people who had something to say," says Millman, who changed his first name from Roland during his first Yiddish class.

He says he wants to raise his children speaking Yiddish as well as they do English.

Debra Cohen-Mlotek and her husband, Zalman Mlotek, are trying to do just that.

Mlotek conducts Yiddish-language choruses and his wife teaches kindergarten in a Jewish day school near their home in Teaneck, N.J.

Mlotek, raised in a secular Yiddish-speaking home, speaks only in the mother tongue to their two sons, ages 9 and 6.

Cohen-Mlotek speaks to them in English.

On Sundays they participate in a play group called Pripetshik (Fireplace), which is run in Manhattan by the Workmen's Circle.

The dozen children involved come only from homes where Yiddish is spoken full-time.

They want their children to know Yiddish because

"it rounds them out as Jews," Cohen-Mlotek says. "It's the same as how I want them to know Talmud."

But for Aaron Lansky, this attempt at re-creation will fail.

"Language doesn't develop outside of context," says Lansky, president of the National Yiddish Book Center, whose new \$8 million facility in Amherst, Mass., was dedicated this week.

"If it becomes just a secret language for the home it won't work."

More important, he says, is for this generation of Yiddish lovers to preserve the artifacts that remain from the halcyon days of Yiddish culture and to understand its role in the evolution of Jewish life.

"If you want to know who you are, you have to know where you've come from," Lansky says.

"Since, in the last 1,000 years, 80 percent of the world's Jews spoke Yiddish, we clearly need to come to terms with the culture if we are to have any sense of continuity in contemporary Jewish life."

At the end of the day, the research collections are where Yiddish will remain, believes Roskies.

The language and culture are not flourishing in any lasting way.

"I am training the next generation of Yiddish scholars, but I don't know if they will have jobs" to go to in the field, he says. □

Beach terror attack averted after thief finds bomb in bag

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A thief who took an unattended bag from a crowded Tel Aviv beach ended up a hero after he discovered a bomb inside and called police to defuse it.

Motti Ashkenazi, 30, a drug addict who has a criminal record, spotted the bag near a group of children playing last Friday at a Tel Aviv beach.

He took the bag and walked to the stairwell of a nearby apartment building to check its contents.

After he found a cookie container with suspicious wires coming out of it, he called police, who defused the explosives.

Police called the incident an attempted terrorist attack and said Ashkenazi's actions averted a serious disaster.

The explosives weighed several pounds and were packed with nails, according to police.

Police were considering whether to give Ashkenazi a certificate of merit.

They noted that only the week before he had been charged with a number of criminal offenses, including attempted car theft.

Ashkenazi maintained that he did not steal the bag.

When he first spotted it, he said, it aroused his suspicion.

He said he asked people around him whose bag it was and then took it away from the area to check the contents.

Ashkenazi added that in light of his deeds, he hoped police would make a gesture by clearing his record and helping him complete a rehabilitation program.

Out of concern for a new wave of terrorist attacks in Tel Aviv, roadblocks were placed at entrances to the city to spot-check cars.

A suicide bomber killed three Israeli women in March at a Tel Aviv cafe.

A Hamas cell from the Hebron area, whose members have been arrested by Israeli and Palestinian security forces, carried out the attack. □

Senate action gives new life to law aiding Russian emigres*By Daniel Kurtzman*

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Jews from the former Soviet Union seeking refuge in the United States have won a reprieve.

A key Senate subcommittee agreed last week to a one-year extension of legislation that allows such refugees to immigrate under eased criteria.

The move came after a House committee deleted the measure from its foreign operations bill, citing budgetary concerns. Following that setback, Jewish immigrant advocates leaned heavily on the Senate to include the measure as part of its foreign aid bill.

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 from the former Soviet Union, have to show a "credible basis for concern" about the possibility of persecution. Other refugees must prove "well-founded fears" of persecution.

The legislation, set to expire in October, has enjoyed strong support over the years. Last year, it passed both houses by wide margins.

This year, however, efforts to extend the measure for a period of two years were dealt a setback after the Congressional Budget Office issued a cost assessment claiming the provision would add hundreds of millions of dollars to the federal budget in coming years.

Immigrant advocates dismissed the budgetary concerns as "bogus," and last week the CBO clarified its assessment, saying a one-year extension of the measure would incur no additional costs. Jewish activists hailed the Senate move and expressed optimism that both houses ultimately would agree to an extension of the refugee provision.

'A fighting chance'

"The camel's nose is in the tent," said Diana Aviv, director of the Council of Jewish Federation's Washington Action Office. "We have a fighting chance now."

Meanwhile, in a separate development affecting Jewish immigrants, the Senate Finance Committee agreed to a plan to restore cuts in immigrant welfare benefits that goes further than both a competing House plan and the original budget deal struck between Congress and the White House.

The landmark welfare reform law enacted last year cut nearly all federal aid to legal immigrants who are not citizens. The Clinton administration and some lawmakers, however, have been seeking to mitigate its impact by restoring some of the benefits.

The Senate plan would cover all non-citizens now collecting benefits and give disabled immigrants until Sept. 30 to sign up for Supplementary Security Income and Medicaid. In addition, it would spend \$200 million to allow immigrant children to qualify for Medicaid.

Altogether, the plan would allow \$700 million more in aid for legal immigrants than the budget agreement. It also goes further than the House plan, which would deny disability benefits to immigrants who were not on the rolls as of Aug. 22, 1996 — the day the welfare law went into effect.

The competing welfare "fixes" will be reconciled in a conference between both houses in coming weeks. □

Cracks in coalition emerge ahead of no-confidence vote*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is facing a coalition crisis that could bring down his 1-year-old government.

Two days before a Knesset debate on a no-confidence motion, Communications Minister Limor Livnat resigned as the Cabinet's liaison to the Knesset. Once considered a Netanyahu confidant, Livnat said she could no longer defend the government's policies.

While she did not resign as minister, Livnat said she was deeply disturbed by the decision-making process in the government and could not respond for the Cabinet at Tuesday's Knesset debate.

A majority vote in favor of the no-confidence motion would bring about new elections both for the Knesset and the prime minister. The motion was submitted last week in the wake of Likud Knesset member Dan Meridor's resignation as finance minister.

Meridor stepped down after the Cabinet adopted a foreign currency reform he sharply opposed. He accused Netanyahu, his longtime rival in the Likud, of using the dispute to push him out of the government.

Livnat criticized Netanyahu for convening the Cabinet last week to decide on the economic issue while she and two other ministers were abroad.

Meridor second minister to resign

Meridor is the second minister to resign from Netanyahu's Cabinet. Likud Knesset member Ze'ev "Benny" Begin stepped down in January after the government signed the Hebron accord transferring control over most of the West Bank city to the Palestinians.

Livnat said that while she had sharp objections to the functioning of the government, she did not plan to vote no-confidence in the government.

The situation was less clear with regard to the immigrant-rights party, Yisrael Ba'Aliyah, which holds seven of the coalition's 66 seats in the 120-member Parliament.

Contacts between Yisrael Ba'Aliyah leader Natan Sharansky and coalition head Michael Eitan of Likud made little headway on Sunday. Sharansky said that if disputes over what he described as broken coalition promises were not resolved by Tuesday, the faction would consider itself free to oppose the government.

Meanwhile, there were stirrings of discontent from the Geshet and Tsomet factions over a pending Cabinet reshuffle prompted by the need to fill the portfolios vacated by Meridor and Begin.

The two factions, which ran jointly with Likud in last year's Knesset elections, have demanded that the appointments come from their ranks in order to step up their representation in the Cabinet.

Netanyahu has been holding his cards close to his chest. He was also awaiting a final decision from former Justice Minister Ya'acov Ne'eman on whether he wished to return to the Cabinet.

Ne'eman was acquitted earlier this month of charges of perjury and obstruction of justice. When he stepped down in August, Netanyahu pledged to reinstate him if he was cleared.

But Israeli media reports that Ne'eman had decided not to return to the government fueled more speculation.

Likud hard-liner Ariel Sharon is the leading contender for the Finance Ministry.

Tourism Minister Moshe Katzav would replace Sharon as national infrastructure minister, according to Israeli media. □

Exhibit of Marc Chagall's art opens in Minsk for first time*By Lev Krichevsky*

MOSCOW (JTA) — After many years in forced oblivion, Marc Chagall's art is becoming a cherished part of national culture in his native Belarus.

Last week, citizens of Minsk got a chance to see the works of their famous countryman for the first time, when a collection of 70 of the artist's lithographs, watercolors and gouaches went on display in the Belarusian capital.

Chagall was born in 1887 in Vitebsk, a city about 150 miles east of Minsk. He studied art and became a member of the avant-garde movement that flourished in this mostly Jewish town during the early part of the century.

Chagall was not the first member of his family to become an artist.

His grandfather Chaim was known for a mural in a synagogue in the Belarusian town of Mogilev. The synagogue was destroyed by Bolshevik authorities in the 1930s.

Chagall left the Soviet Union for Western Europe in 1922. He spent most of his life in France, where he died in 1985.

For many years Chagall's work was criticized in the Soviet Union, often in an anti-Zionist context.

Despite the fact that Chagall often used the images of his childhood and early adulthood in much of his work, not a single work by him was on display in Belarus.

Chagall benefits from collapse of USSR

As the Soviet Union began to crumble, Chagall began to earn recognition.

In 1991, an international art festival bearing his name — now an annual event — was organized in his hometown. Soon after, some of his works went on display.

In 1992, a statue honoring him was unveiled in the city.

The artist's granddaughter, Meret Meyer Graber, who brought the current exhibition to Minsk from two French museums, says it took her several years to organize the exhibition in the former Soviet republic.

Now, however, her work is paying off.

Her grandfather is gaining official acclaim in the country he long dreamed of seeing again.

Belarus' Culture Minister Alexander Sosnovsky said on the opening night of the Minsk exhibition that "Chagall has come home after many years of oblivion."

Last year, during his trip to Vitebsk, Belarus' President Alexander Lukashenko called Chagall one of the greatest representatives of Belarussian culture — words that no official in the country would utter when the Soviet Union existed.

Vitebsk will see Chagall's works again in a few weeks, when the exhibition moves from Minsk to Vitebsk. In addition, a one-story Vitebsk house that belonged to the Chagalls will be opened as a museum during this year's Chagall festival.

The annual festival has turned into the main event in the cultural life of Vitebsk, says Arkadiy Shulman.

Shulam is the editor of *Mishpacha*, a Jewish literary and historical magazine published in the artist's native city of 250,000.

"It is great that Chagall has been officially recognized as a part of our country's culture," says Larisa Spiegel, an art student from Minsk.

"I think this should make Belarussian Jews more proud of being Jews and the rest of our citizens more proud of living in the land of Chagall." □

German insurance firm hires U.S. scholar to probe Nazi ties*By Deidre Berger*

FRANKFURT (JTA) — A leading German insurance company has named an American historian to research the firm's past ties to Nazi activities.

Gerald Feldman, director of the Center for German and European Studies at the University of California at Berkeley, will investigate the Allianz Group's cooperation with Nazi officials and institutions during World War II.

Allianz is one of seven European insurance firms named in a multibillion dollar class-action lawsuit filed in March in New York. The suit alleges that the companies never paid surviving family members claims due on life insurance policies.

Publicity surrounding the suit prompted Allianz to set up international hotlines to answer questions about possible unpaid claims on policies taken out before the war. More than 700 people have called the hotlines, but most have too little information for the company to locate old policies immediately, according to an Allianz spokesman.

Allianz, which was the largest insurance company in Germany in the 1930s, has also commissioned the auditing firm of Arthur Andersen to search company records for evidence of unpaid policies.

Allianz has not yet made a decision on possible compensation.

It has asked Feldman to investigate the company's role in compensation negotiations between West Germany and Israel in the 1950s and 1960s.

Feldman's study is expected to be completed by 1999.

Allianz says it will publicize information prior to the completion of the final report.

A recent story in the German newsmagazine *Der Spiegel* revealed that Allianz insured factories and barracks run by the SS in and near Dachau and Auschwitz. □

Court rules that Lodz Ghetto tailor qualifies for state pension*By Daniel Dagan*

BONN (JTA) — A court's ruling that a Jew who worked in the Lodz Ghetto qualifies for German state pensions could serve as a precedent for hundreds of similar cases pending in German courts.

The ruling, by the Federal Court for Social Matters in Kassel, came in the case of a 75-year-old woman who lived in the ghetto from 1940 through 1944, when the area was liberated by Soviet troops.

The woman, who moved to the United States after the war, worked in Lodz as a tailor. Under the ruling, the plaintiff will receive a one-time payment of several thousand dollars.

She will also begin receiving a monthly payment equivalent to the minimum state pension for retired employees in Germany.

The pivotal legal question raised at the trial was whether the work performed in the ghetto should be regarded as slave labor.

If so, the plaintiff would not qualify for a pension, since the state-run fund is only handling payments for employees who took jobs of their own free will.

The court said the conditions under which the woman was employed implied an element of coercion. Nevertheless, the judges said the female tailor's relationship with her employer qualified as a "verbal working contract" under which the woman was paid for the specific work she performed. □