

NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ The ongoing dispute between Israel's prime minister and foreign minister escalated after reports of a meeting between Likud hard-line minister Ariel Sharon and a senior Palestinian official. Foreign Minister David Levy was unaware that the talks occurred. [Page 2]

■ The annual assembly of the Jewish Agency for Israel closed after adopting a series of resolutions supporting Jewish unity, condemning violence against Jews at prayer and increasing funding for programs of the three major religious streams. It also passed a major restructuring plan aimed at making the agency more efficient.

■ Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said American-style religious pluralism has no place in Israel. Addressing the Jewish Agency for Israel Assembly, Netanyahu appealed for harmony among the Jewish people and a greater understanding of Israel's "slowly evolving status quo" in religious matters. [Page 3]

■ Some 50,000 Israelis attended a rally in Tel Aviv demanding early elections. At a separate gathering nearby, several thousand Israelis protested what they view as coercion by Orthodox Jews. [Page 4]

■ Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu telephoned the mayor of Hebron to denounce the distribution of anti-Islamic posters. [Page 4]

■ An Italian military prosecutor demanded a life sentence for former SS Capt. Erich Priebke, who is on trial for his role in a World War II massacre near Rome. [Page 4]

■ Berlin's Jewish community will be led by a member of Germany's postwar generation for the first time. Andreas Nachama, 46, was elected head of Germany's largest Jewish community.

■ The Vatican offered to host renewed talks between Israel and the Palestinians. Pope John Paul II sent separate letters to Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat, urging them to end the impasse.

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD**Southern summer camp spawns generations of committed Jews**

By Rebecca Phillips

HENDERSONVILLE, N.C. (JTA) — Camp has changed.

Former campers remember the time they put a Volkswagen on the island in the middle of the camp's lake. Now pranks have caught up with technology — tapping the office phone line to make long-distance calls.

Yet camp has stayed the same.

There are new facilities and a new hiking trail, but most alumni agree that the essence of camp remains eternal.

"They say you can't go back again, but in camp you can," said former camper Peter Pardoll.

And so they did.

Earlier this month, as parents across the country were preparing to send their children to summer camps, 350 alumni of Blue Star Camps in western North Carolina returned for a weekend to celebrate the 50th season of "the haven for Jews in the South."

They ranged from recent counselors in their 20s to a former staff member who will soon turn 90. They came from across the United States and from Israel.

Many described the reunion as a return to their "home away from home" and discussed how Blue Star had a profound influence on the evolution of their Jewish identities.

"If you want to raise kids Jewish, send them to a Jewish camp," said Rodger Popkin, who has directed the camp with his wife, Candy, for the past 27 years.

For many alumni, the Blue Star's family owners distinguish it from other Jewish summer camps. Campers feel they are members of the extended Popkin family.

"It's a continuing, big family," Pardoll said.

When brothers Herman, Harry and Ben Popkin reunited after serving in the military during World War II, they recognized that the South was lacking summer camps for Jewish children.

They opened Blue Star in northern Georgia in 1948 and moved it to its current property in 1950.

'What years were you at Blue Star?'

Former campers remark that the best way to start a conversation with any Southern Jew is to ask, "What years were you at Blue Star?"

One of the largest privately owned camps in the country, Blue Star — which began with 60 children per year and now has more than 700 each summer — has been a bastion in the Southern Jewish community.

"Blue Star is a link to Jewish history in the South," said Steve Zimmerman of Houston.

Neal Esserman of Jacksonville, Fla., agreed.

"All Jewish kids in the South had to meet at Blue Star," he said. "It's a requirement; it's like having your Bar Mitzvah."

Miles Kuttler of Miami, a former camp program coordinator, called it a "sociological phenomenon," with "small pockets of Jews" in the South meeting each other at Blue Star.

For many, "this was the major Jewish input in their lives," he said.

During Shabbat services, Bill Rothschild, an ordained rabbi who now practices law in Atlanta, elaborated on this "phenomenon."

His d'var Torah about the week's parshah related the first few chapters of the Book of Numbers to the Blue Star experience. The portion tells how God commanded a census of the community and Jews became aware of their numbers for the first time.

For children who grew up with only a few other Jews in their towns, Blue Star was where they became aware that Jews existed in greater numbers, Rothschild said.

While most of Blue Star's campers are no longer from small towns, the emphasis on Judaism remains important, though it has less of an observant orientation than camps associated with particular religious movements.

Blue Star provides a kosher dining hall and weekly Shabbat and Havdalah services. The camp also offers Hebrew classes and Bar and Bat Mitzvah lessons.

For many campers, this is more Judaism than they get at home.

The camp "teaches you the basis of Judaism and of tzedakah," Pardoll said.

Kuttler said Blue Star does not compel religious observance, but tries to "make it palatable to someone who doesn't have it at home."

For some, the camp's level of religious observance is not enough. One father of current Blue Star campers revealed that he preferred the more observant style of the Ramah camps to the laid-back atmosphere of Blue Star.

Lynda Wachsteter, a camper in the 1950s who now lives in Short Hills, N.J., believes that the changing Jewish experience at Blue Star reflects shifts in the American Jewish community and in Israel.

"We lived through the founding of the state," she said. "There was a real halutz spirit then. We thought we were the pioneers."

Peggy Shulman acknowledged the positive impact Blue Star had on her Jewish identity, saying that it motivated her to work for the Jewish National Fund in Atlanta.

"All of my feelings for Judaism really come from this camp," she said.

A recent survey of Blue Star alumni backs the proposition that Jewish summer camps are good for continuity.

In honor of the camp's golden anniversary, the Popkins commissioned University of Miami researcher Ira Sheskin to study the Jewish identities of former Blue Star campers.

Sheskin used the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey as a basis of comparison for his survey of alumni, parents of campers and counselors.

For issues such as intermarriage, keeping kosher and lighting Chanukah candles, former campers were typically more observant than the average American Jew.

"You learn it in a fun setting, you remember it," Miles Kuttler said.

"Camping is the best Jewish identity focus point anybody could have," agreed Rita Klee of Atlanta.

Findings have larger significance

Although the study was based only on Blue Star Camps, Sheskin believes its findings about continuity are important for the larger Jewish community.

"Jews are clearly looking for things that will make the next generation want to be Jewish," he said.

But Judaism was only one aspect that brought so many people back to camp for the June 6-8 reunion.

Some credit Blue Star with their career paths.

Many believe that it was Blue Star that first got Stuart Eizenstat, the camp's most famous alumnus, involved in politics. He served as mayor of the Teen Village here.

Eizenstat could not attend the reunion, as he was in Washington to be sworn in as undersecretary of state for economic, business and agricultural affairs.

His cousins Joel Eizenstat and Malcolm Minsk, former campers who attended the reunion, confirmed Blue Star's impact on his career.

Others recalled the influence that Blue Star has had on their families.

"Blue Star is our life," said Andrea Esserman, who met her husband, Neal, at camp 29 years ago.

The camp boasts many married couples who first met during the summer.

"If we did nothing but bringing couples together, that would be worthwhile," Herman Popkin said.

Whatever the reason for their return, the 350 weekend campers were sad to leave Sunday afternoon.

Candy Popkin said a reunion like this "renews your sense of purpose." She now has a greater appreciation of "the scope of what [Blue Star] has meant in people's lives." □

Israeli foreign minister objects to Sharon's role in negotiations

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition crisis took a new twist this week with the disclosure that hard-line Likud Knesset member Ariel Sharon was engaged in secret talks with the Palestinians.

Foreign Minister David Levy canceled a scheduled Sunday meeting with Netanyahu aimed at resolving their differences. Part of the crisis in their relationship has been the foreign minister's complaint that he was being left out of political decision-making.

Levy, along with eight other coalition members, stayed away from last week's no-confidence vote in the Knesset, which the Netanyahu government survived. During two meetings following the vote, Netanyahu promised to let Levy lead the Palestinian negotiations, which have been deadlocked for more than three months.

However, Netanyahu never mentioned the June 16 meeting between National Infrastructure Minister Sharon and the second in command to Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat, Mahmoud Abbas, at Sharon's ranch in southern Israel.

According to an Israel Television report last Friday, Sharon and Abbas, better known as Abu-Mazen, both described their talks as positive and agreed to continue the dialogue.

Knesset member Abdel Wahab Darawshe, of the Arab Democratic Party-United Arab List, said he arranged the meeting and hoped that it "would break the impasse the failed policies of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu have led us to."

However, sources close to Abu-Mazen said that it was Sharon who in fact leaked news of the talks in an effort to strengthen his own image as someone who could be involved in negotiations with the Palestinians. Sharon is the leading candidate to be named finance minister, a post vacated two weeks ago by Likud Knesset member Dan Meridor.

One of Sharon's conditions for assuming the post is to be made a member of the Inner Security Cabinet, which is comprised of the prime minister, foreign minister and defense minister.

Sources in Levy's Geshet Party said the foreign minister was stuck in a difficult position — lacking the political leverage to bring down the government by leaving the coalition, but wanting to assert his influence in policy-making.

In another development, Israeli media reported Sunday that Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai met secretly last week with Nabil Sha'ath, a senior Palestinian Authority official. Levy was aware of the meeting, which was held to discuss ways to renew negotiations, according to Israel Radio.

Meanwhile, Labor Knesset member Ephraim Sneh met Sunday with Arafat in Gaza. Sneh said afterwards that Arafat had pledged to deepen security cooperation with Israel, though he gave no details as to how or when that would be done.

The Palestinians cut off security cooperation in March in anger over Israel's decision to build a new neighborhood. □

Netanyahu appeals for peace among Jews on religious issues

By Michele Chabin

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Before Israel can make peace with its Arab neighbors, the Jewish people must make peace with one another.

That was the message Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu conveyed Sunday to the Jewish Agency for Israel assembly.

"For there to be peace between Jews and Arabs, between Israelis and Palestinians, first there must be at peace at home," said Netanyahu, referring to the growing rift between religious and secular Jews in Israel and the Diaspora.

"The key is to have peace among the Jews. We must have unity to meet our goals."

While stressing that Israelis must learn to be more tolerant of Jews abroad, the prime minister rejected the notion of American-style pluralism as a model for Israeli society.

"The request has been made to turn Israel into the United States. It's not the United States."

Religion-state relationship still evolving

Unlike the United States, which long ago defined the boundaries between religion and state, the religion-state relationship in Israel is still evolving, Netanyahu said.

Netanyahu recalled for the more than 500 delegates on the assembly's final day that Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion concluded nearly 50 years ago that "there is no way to resolve the disagreements between the halachic view of running the Jewish state and the secular view."

For this reason, Netanyahu said, the country has developed "a series of ad hoc compromises which Ben-Gurion called the status quo. We have communities that are becoming increasingly secular, and others that are becoming increasingly religious over time."

To accommodate both lifestyles, "there are certain compromises we make to keep this society intact," Netanyahu said.

"Religious communities are closed on Shabbat, while the secular communities are open. Some Israelis go to the army, some go to yeshivot."

In his address Netanyahu appeared to scold Reform and Conservative Jewish leaders for disturbing what he called "the slowly evolving status quo."

In an apparent reference to Diaspora efforts to block legislation that would cement in law Orthodox authority over conversions, Netanyahu said, "there was an attempt to deliver a hammer blow."

While he acknowledged that the conversion bill was introduced by Orthodox Knesset members without input from Diaspora Jews, Netanyahu said Diaspora Jews often do not consult Israelis on religious matters.

"When it comes to patrilineal descent, no one consulted Israel," said Netanyahu, referring to the Reform movement's decision to regard as Jewish any child born of a Jewish father.

"If you don't want unilateral actions, let's avoid hammer blows."

Legislative work on the conversion bill was suspended last week, after non-Orthodox leaders negotiated an accord with the government establishing a committee to find a compromise this summer on the divisive issue.

"I urge people to tread very lightly on this very fragile ground," Netanyahu said. "I urge greater tolerance toward one another."

Change, he added, "must be incremental."

Judy Palkovitz, a delegate from Pittsburgh, said she appreciated Netanyahu's candor on the pluralism issue.

"I think he said what really is, even though it's not really what some of us would like to see."

Although she said she respects the status quo in Israel, Palkovitz wished for the day when "Reform and Conservative rabbis are recognized in Israel and allowed to do, for those who want their services, what they want."

As for the need to consult the Diaspora on religious matters in Israel, she said, "When [Netanyahu] mentioned unilateral decisions on patrilineal descent, he was correct."

"It's a two-way street. Americans can't make decisions and just expect them to be accepted here."

At the same time, Palkovitz stressed that Jews from all streams must feel welcome in Israel.

"I wish Netanyahu had explained how he's going to protect people who go to the Kotel to pray."

A group of non-Orthodox men and women praying near the Western Wall on Shavuot were attacked by fervently Orthodox yeshiva students.

In contrast to pluralism, there was consensus in the hall when Netanyahu called for 50,000 young Jews to visit Israel every year.

"That's five times the amount who normally come," he said.

"We must make great efforts to bring youngsters here. There is nothing like walking the streets of Jerusalem, touching the [Western] Wall, to connect them to their roots."

While he applauded the prime minister's goal to bring more young Jews to Israel, Alan Feldbaum, a delegate from South Bend, Ind., had another idea.

Referring to a three-day fact-finding trip he and other delegates had taken last week to the former Soviet Union, Feldbaum proposed a Peace Corps-type program that would bring together Israeli and Diaspora teens.

"I'd like to take Jewish kids from the U.S. and their Israeli counterparts and send them to places like Nikolaev, a little town in Odessa we visited. They could be partners, teaching other young people. Then we would really have something."

"The opportunity is there," Feldbaum said, "if we put the resources behind it." □

Jews meet Australian leader

By Jeremy Jones

SYDNEY (JTA) — Responding to a report on anti-Semitic violence and vandalism, Australia's Prime Minister John Howard told a delegation of Jewish leaders in Sydney that "the last thing I want is for any section of the Jewish community to feel under attack, pressure or discrimination."

The meeting was Prime Minister Howard's first with the elected leaders of the Australian Jewish community.

The 8-member delegation raised several matters of concern to the community.

These included anti-Semitism, racism and the demands on the Jewish community to provide security for its communal institutions.

The prime minister told the delegation he understood the connection Jews have with Jerusalem based on his own experiences as a tourist in Israel in 1964.

Then, it was impossible to enter the Old City of Jerusalem from the Israeli side.

He also said Australia is firmly committed to supporting the Oslo-based peace process.

The president of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, Diane Shteinman, said the prime minister "was open and frank on some of the complexities in the issues we raised." □

Former Nazi officer defends role in 1944 Italian massacre*By Ruth E. Gruber*

ROME (JTA) — Former SS Capt. Erich Priebke, on trial for the second time for his role in the Nazis' worst World War II atrocity in Italy, appeared in court last week to read out a lengthy statement in his defense.

The 84-year-old Priebke, who participated in the March 1944 massacre of 335 men and boys at the Ardeatine Caves south of Rome, took half an hour to read his unexpected statement. About 75 of the massacre victims were Jews.

"At the Ardeatine Caves, I was forced to shoot," he said. "I could not avoid that horror."

He said nothing could be done because the order came from Hitler. "To execute that terrible order was for me a tragedy, something horrendous," he said.

"If I could have avoided having done it I would have, but my death would not have saved those men," he said.

He admitted shooting dead two of the victims and of holding the list of people who were to be killed in his hand "for a couple of hours."

The Nazis, who then occupied Rome, ordered the mass execution at the Ardeatine Caves in direct reprisal for a bomb attack in Rome by an Italian resistance group that left 33 German soldiers dead.

"I never killed anyone before that day and I've never had to do it since," Priebke said.

Prosecutors called for a sentence of life in prison Friday.

In his statement Priebke stressed that for nearly 50 years after the war he had lived openly as an esteemed citizen in Bariloche, Argentina, and had never tried to conceal his identity. He said that he had made two vacation trips to Italy using a passport in his own name, and in 1993 had dinner with two Italian members of the European Parliament during an event sponsored by the local Bariloche Italian association.

In interviews published in Italian newspapers Wednesday, the two Italian politicians confirmed that Priebke had sat between them at the dinner but they said that they had not recognized his name or known his background.

Priebke was discovered by an ABC television team in Bariloche in May 1994, and was extradited to Italy in November 1995.

Last August, an Italian military court found him guilty of taking part in the massacre, but ruled that he could not be punished because of extenuating circumstances and a statute of limitations.

This verdict prompted protests, and Priebke was arrested again.

The verdict was annulled on appeal and a new trial ordered, which began in April. Priebke is being held under house arrest in a monastery near Rome during the trial. □

Israelis rally for Netanyahu to resign, call new elections*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli protesters took to the streets of Tel Aviv this week in separate rallies calling for an end to the Netanyahu government and to Orthodox influence in their lives.

Some 50,000 Israelis called on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to step down and call for early elections during a rally Saturday night at Rabin square in central Tel Aviv.

The demonstration came after a week of growing

crisis within the coalition. While the government defeated a no-confidence motion in the Knesset, several coalition members, including Foreign Minister David Levy, stayed away from last week's vote to protest Netanyahu's manner of running the country.

Commentators said that strains within coalition ranks could increase the chances of early elections.

The event was organized by a grass-roots organization formed in response to the Bar-On affair, an influence-peddling scandal in which police recommended earlier this year that Netanyahu and other top government officials be indicted for fraud in the short-lived appointment of an attorney general.

State prosecutors closed the case against the prime minister for lack of evidence.

At another rally in Tel Aviv, several thousand Israelis protested what they maintained are attempts at religious coercion by haredi, or fervently Orthodox, Jews.

One of the slogans for the demonstration, "Stop the haredim" drew sharp criticism from both religious and political circles, who maintained that it was racist and intolerant.

The rally came against the backdrop of the political strength the religious parties gained in the last elections and the resulting policy. Three religious parties, which hold 23 seats in the Knesset, are part of Netanyahu's coalition.

Earlier this year, the High Court upheld the transportation minister's decision to close a main Jerusalem thoroughfare, which runs through religious neighborhoods, to traffic during Sabbath and Jewish holiday prayer times.

Religious coalition members have also been trying to push through legislation that would set into law the Orthodox establishment's sole authority over conversions conducted in Israel. That issue prompted a backlash from Reform and Conservative movements in the Diaspora.

An interdenominational committee formed as a result of negotiations between non-Orthodox U.S. Jewish leaders and the government is trying to work out a compromise on the conversion legislation by mid-August. □

Netanyahu calls Hebron mayor to denounce offensive posters*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has denounced the distribution of posters in Hebron depicting the prophet Mohammed as a pig stepping on the Koran.

"I felt it necessary to call the mayor of Hebron to express not only my personal revulsion but the revulsion of the entire people of Israel," Netanyahu said in an address to the Jewish Agency for Israel Assembly meeting in Jerusalem.

"This runs counter to our outlook as Jews and our respect and appreciation for the Islamic religion and for its founder the prophet Mohammed."

Netanyahu telephoned the West Bank city's Palestinian mayor Sunday. Palestinian officials termed Netanyahu's remarks inadequate, and called on him to convene a news conference to denounce the leaflets publicly.

Israel detained over the weekend a 25-year-old Jerusalem resident, Tatyana Suskin, on suspicion of pasting the posters on storefronts in Hebron and planning to distribute more.

Suskin was arrested while throwing stones at Palestinian cars and stores in Hebron. She had dozens of the posters in her possession.

After spotting the posters in Hebron, dozens of Palestinians rioted over the weekend, ending a week of relative calm in the tense city. □