



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ **The U.S. House Appropriations Committee approved a foreign aid bill that includes more than \$3 billion in U.S. aid to Israel and \$2.1 billion for Egypt.** The measure would allow the United States to provide \$100 million in aid to the Palestinian Authority only if Congress renews separate legislation known as the Middle East Peace Facilitation Act, which expires at the end of the month.

■ **Jewish groups are trying to determine the impact of a new law in Russia that would restrict religious activity.** The law, which has passed both houses of Parliament, awaits President Boris Yeltsin's signature. [Page 1]

■ **Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai characterized his talks with Palestinian Authority official Nabil Sha'ath as "effective" and "conducted in a positive and good atmosphere."** The two reportedly discussed the opening of an airport in the Gaza Strip. [Page 3]

■ **Two Israeli border policemen were wounded in a roadside explosion on the outskirts of the West Bank town of Nablus.** The bomb was detonated by remote control alongside a border police jeep escorting a bus carrying students from a yeshiva in Nablus. [Page 3]

■ **Italy will return gold, jewelry and other valuables plundered by the Nazis from Jews in northeastern Italy during World War II, according to a law passed in Rome.** [Page 2]

■ **The World Jewish Restitution Organization said it had reached a tentative agreement with Poland concerning the return of Jewish communal property.** Under the reported agreement, the WJRO, the Polish Jewish community and the Polish government will work together to handle the return of properties.

■ **Maurice Papon, a former French Cabinet official, will be tried on charges of wartime crimes against humanity beginning Oct. 8, French officials announced.** Relatives of alleged victims of Papon, who served in the Vichy government, have been seeking to bring him to justice for 15 years.

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

Yeltsin believed likely to sign bill restricting religious freedom

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — A bill that would place restrictions on religious activity in Russia has moved one step closer to becoming law.

Under the Law of Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations, which overwhelmingly passed Russia's upper house of Parliament last Friday, official status and full rights would be given to a few established denominations — the Russian Orthodox Church, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism.

Other "non-traditional" faiths and missionaries would be restricted in their activities.

The lower house overwhelmingly passed the bill last month.

In order to become law, the bill must be signed by Russian President Boris Yeltsin within two weeks.

Yeltsin reportedly is set to sign it.

The prospect of the new law has left Jews and Jewish experts scurrying to determine its impact on the country's estimated 750,000 to 1 million Jews.

"It's not good, and it has the potential to be horrible," said Mark Levin, the executive director of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry.

Levin added that he has been discussing his opposition to the bill with both Russian and American leaders.

A group of U.S. legislators sent a letter to Yeltsin on Wednesday, urging him to veto the bill.

"This law would create a chilling atmosphere and perhaps even reverse the tremendous steps toward democracy and freedom that Russia has taken over the past several years," said U.S. Rep. Gary Ackerman (D-N.Y.).

Russian legislators see the bill as a measure aimed against various "cults" and "sects" that have blossomed in Russia since freedom of religion provisions were adopted seven years ago.

But human rights activists described the measure as discriminatory and contradicting the Russian constitution that guarantees freedom of religion.

"The law is highly discriminatory," said Diederik Lohman, director of the Moscow office of Human Rights Watch/Helsinki.

It "has a lot of provisions that have nothing to do with protecting Russian society from dangerous sects," said Lohman, whose group has written to Yeltsin urging him not to sign the bill.

The bill establishes a labyrinthine hierarchy equal to any created by the great satirist of Russian bureaucracy, the 19th-century writer Nikolai Gogol.

Judaism threatened in a variety of ways

While Judaism was mentioned as one of Russia's "traditional faiths," it is unlikely to receive the same treatment as Russian Orthodoxy and Islam.

To have full rights and be recognized as a "religious organization," a group needs to prove it has functioned for more than 50 years in more than half of Russia's 89 provinces.

Other faiths will be dubbed "religious groups" and receive no legal protection.

Fewer than 30 synagogues function in Russia today. Most of them were opened officially only after the fall of communism six years ago.

Since religion was banned under the Soviet regime, the law appears to threaten certain branches of Judaism that are new to Russia, such as the Reform movement and the Lubavitch.

It also seems to threaten Catholicism and many Protestant denominations.

"Potentially, the law might create for non-mainstream forms of Judaism the same problems which it will create for non-mainstream forms of Protestant Christianity," said Lawrence Uzzell, the Moscow representative of the Keston Institute of Oxford, England, which studies religious freedom in former Communist states.

In order to become "religious organizations" and gain the higher status, "new" faiths must prove they have been operating in a local area for

15 years. Bestowing this designation is left up to the discretion of local officials.

This could prevent Jewish leaders from speaking out, since their interests would be served by staying on good terms with these officials.

Local officials could also use their increased power as a justification to refuse the return of Jewish communal property.

Under current legislation, Jewish communities can regain their former property, mainly synagogues, that were confiscated by the Bolsheviks.

However, no progress has been made in several communities because of the intransigence of local officials.

Although Zinovi Kogan, the leader of Hineini, Moscow's Reform congregation, opposes the measure, he said he didn't believe Reform Jews would be seriously affected by the law.

Berel Lazar, the chief emissary of Lubavitch in Russia, also expressed mixed reactions.

While he is opposed to the Russian state mixing in religious affairs, he welcomes the restrictions the law would place on groups such as Jews for Jesus. "What they're doing here is unbelievable," he said. □

Italy to return looted gold to Trieste Jewish community

By Ruth E. Gruber

ROME (JTA) — Italy will return gold, jewelry and other valuables plundered by the Nazis from Jews in northeastern Italy during World War II, according to a law passed this week in Rome.

The Italian Treasury Ministry announced Wednesday that Parliament had given final approval to a bill sponsored by Treasury Minister Carlo Azeglio Ciampi to hand over the contents of five sacks of valuables discovered in a Treasury vault earlier this year.

The sacks contain jewelry, precious stones, watches, coins, silver cutlery and other objects, personal items, gold and even gold teeth that were looted from Jews at the Nazi death camp of San Saba, near Trieste.

They soon will be handed over to the Union of Italian Jewish Communities, the umbrella body of Italian Jews, which will in turn give them to the Jewish community of Trieste.

Tullia Zevi, president of the union, expressed appreciation for "the correctness, the timeliness and the speed" of the Parliament. "I hope that this example will be followed by other countries."

A Treasury Ministry statement said that the law "is of great moral significance and puts our country among the first to take legal steps to fulfill a duty of civility and solidarity towards the Jewish communities."

Claims for Holocaust compensation by the Trieste Jewish community, backed by a campaign last January in the local Trieste newspaper, prompted a government investigation into what had happened to the possessions of Trieste-area Jews who had been sent to San Saba.

A commission established that the goods had belonged to Jews killed or interned in San Saba, the only Nazi death camp on Italian soil.

The investigation revealed that the plundered treasure was taken to Klagenfurt, in Austria, by the retreating Germans at the end of the war, where it was hidden in the cellars of the local Nazi chief.

After the war, the valuables were brought back to Trieste by the Allies, but only a small fraction was claimed by surviving Jews.

The rest was deposited in a Trieste bank vault and eventually sent to the Treasury in Rome for safekeeping in 1962. □

Skewed book on Holocaust to remain in Slovak schools

By Randi Druzin

PRAGUE (JTA) — A teacher's manual romanticizing the lot of Slovak Jews during World War II will not be withdrawn from Slovakian schools.

Ondrej Nemcok, Slovakia's deputy minister of education, said this week that "History of Slovakia for Slovaks" would remain in school libraries, though it would not be used as an educational tool.

"If the manual is distributed to schools, why shouldn't it remain in libraries?" Nemcok said Tuesday. "In Germany, 'Mein Kampf' was distributed and was available in libraries," said Nemcok, referring to the infamous treatise written by Adolf Hitler.

Slovak Jews have voiced outrage at the government's decision, and at the perceived support for the manual by the Catholic Church.

"We have protested several times against this open approval of fascism," said Josef Weiss, director of the Central Federation of Jewish Religious Communities in Slovakia. The senior education official's comments came less than two weeks after Slovak Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar criticized the manual at a conference in Amsterdam.

He said the publication "could not be used in the education sector" because segments of the manual are "inaccurate and historically wrong."

The premier's comments led many observers to believe the manual would be withdrawn after protests by Jewish groups and other organizations, including the European Union, which had financed the publication and distribution of 90,000 copies of the manual. The EU later explained its decision to fund the manual as an oversight.

The manual, written by Milan Durica, a Slovak priest and Padua University professor, states that during school holidays, children detained in an internment camp near Bratislava "could spend a period outside with Jewish families living in freedom."

"Dentists were even able to offer gold teeth" to the camp's residents, "which the great majority of the Slovak population could not afford," the text states.

Jaroslav Sranek, spokesman for the Jewish federation, said that at a June 30 meeting attended by national religious leaders and Slovak President Michal Kovac, Cardinal Jan Korec and other high-ranking church officials expressed their support for the manual.

Korec was unavailable for comment, but the Slovak Press Agency TASR quoted the archbishop's office in Trnava as stating that the manual "is a professionally written overview of the history of Slovakia and Slovaks drafted in national spirit." □

Southern Baptists picket gay Jews

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK (JTA) — Worshipers at the Sabbath morning services of the 15th World Conference of Gay, Lesbian & Bisexual Jews were picketed by Southern Baptist protesters, according to participants in the meeting.

The dozen or so Southern Baptist protesters stood outside Congregation Beth El Binah in Dallas on Saturday in a pouring rain, shouting at the worshipers to repent both for their homosexuality and their Jewishness, said Jack Gilbert, of London, president of the gay organization.

The World Congress of Gay & Lesbian Jewish Organizations is the umbrella group for 65 gay, lesbian and bisexual Jewish organizations in North and South America, Europe, South Africa, Australia and Israel. Beth El Binah is a Reform congregation that caters to gay, lesbian and bisexual Jews. □

Israelis, Palestinians resume talks with aim of opening Gaza airport

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — As Israel and the Palestinians attempted to resume negotiations this week, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu sought to head off the stirrings of another coalition crisis.

Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai and Palestinian Authority official Nabil Sha'ath met Wednesday night to discuss the opening of a Palestinian airport in the Gaza Strip.

The airport is one of the outstanding elements of the interim phase agreement signed by the two sides that must still be implemented.

The sides have been at odds over Israeli demands to maintain overall security supervision of the terminal.

Mordechai's spokesman said after the talks, in which the Egyptian and U.S. ambassadors to Israel also took part, that the meeting was "effective" and had been conducted in a "positive and good atmosphere."

The spokesman said Mordechai told Sha'ath that Foreign Minister David Levy was drawing up a negotiating team and would soon approve the start of negotiations on the matter.

The discussions did not touch on some of the larger issues of contention in Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, namely constructing in disputed territory.

The Palestinians broke off negotiations in mid-March after Israel began building a new Jewish neighborhood in southeastern Jerusalem.

Meanwhile, sources in the Prime Minister's Office were quoted in Israeli media as expressing concern that National Infrastructure Minister Ariel Sharon might lead right-wing opposition against the opening of the airport.

He might also oppose further Israeli troop redeployment from the West Bank, which is scheduled for the fall under the interim accords.

The Israeli daily Ha'aretz quoted sources in the Prime Minister's Office and senior Likud members as being worried that Sharon might act in response to Ya'acov Ne'eman's appointment as finance minister this week.

After Dan Meridor resigned the post last month, Sharon had been the leading candidate. However, earlier this week, he was told that the post would go to Ne'eman instead. Levy had fiercely opposed his appointment.

Sharon stormed out of a meeting with Netanyahu after several minutes on Wednesday, which sources interpreted as a signal to the prime minister that Sharon could create as embarrassing a situation for Netanyahu as Sharon himself had felt with the Ne'eman appointment.

During a tour of northern Israel on Thursday, Sharon sharply attacked the prime minister, accusing him of not consulting with him on security and political affairs.

For his part, Netanyahu said he hoped the two could meet again. Sources in the Prime Minister's Office reiterated Netanyahu's pledge to consult with Sharon on matters of importance. □

Israeli security goes on high alert

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli security forces went on heightened alert Thursday following warnings of a possible terrorist attack in Israel.

The alert also came as incidents of violence were reported throughout the West Bank.

In one of the incidents, two border policemen were wounded, one of them moderately, in a roadside explosion on the outskirts of Nablus overnight.

The bomb had been detonated by remote control

near a border police jeep escorting a bus of students from the yeshiva at Joseph's Tomb in the West Bank town.

In Hebron, the head of the Israel Defense Force central command, Maj.-Gen. Uzi Dayan, ordered the closure of Palestinian shops after shots were fired at an apartment building in the Jewish quarter.

No one was injured.

Meanwhile, one Palestinian was reportedly wounded during demonstrations in the city on Thursday. Six gasoline bombs were thrown at Israeli security forces. Israelis troops dispersed the protesters with rubber bullets. No soldiers were reported injured. □

Israeli official decides against investigation into Barak actions

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel's state comptroller has decided not to investigate claims into the behavior of Labor Party leader Ehud Barak during a training accident while he headed the Israel Defense Force.

Barak, the former IDF chief of staff and one of Israel's most decorated officers, welcomed the decision, saying it vindicated his name.

Justice Minister Tzachi Hanegbi, who in a parliamentary debate several weeks ago cited the allegations that Barak had left wounded soldiers in the field, said he would order a state commission of inquiry into the matter.

During the training accident, five members of an IDF elite commando unit were killed and six others wounded when a live missile erroneously fired. Barak was among the senior officers who were observing the drill.

Two and a half years after the incident, two soldiers who were wounded in the accident and bereaved parents raised allegations about Barak's behavior.

They maintained that Barak did not help treat the wounded, did not answer pleas for help and left the site before the evacuation of the wounded was completed.

In a statement before the Knesset comptroller committee, the state comptroller, Miriam Ben-Porat, noted the time it took for the allegations to surface, as well as the fact that following the incident witnesses had praised the medical treatment and evacuation of the wounded. □

Remark about Gypsies irks Jews

By Ruth E. Gruber

ROME (JTA) — An outspoken right-wing candidate for deputy mayor of Rome has angered local Jews by apparently comparing them to Gypsies, whose formal name is Roma.

Teodoro Buontempo, who is running as part of the center-right Freedom Alliance, was quoted in an interview as saying, "If Rome can coexist with the Jewish community, it will learn how to do so also with the Gypsies."

Some Roman Jews were offended by the remark, as Gypsies in Rome generally live in campsites that often trigger angry protest by local residents. Gypsies often suffer discrimination in Rome.

Jews have lived in Rome for more than 2,000 years, but when Rome was ruled by the popes, they were forced to live in a ghetto, which was abolished in 1870.

Some interpreted the remark to mean that Buontempo advocated placing ghetto-type restrictions on Gypsies.

Victor Magiar, a Rome city official who is also on the board of Rome's Jewish community, told a newspaper that such an idea would be "tragically grotesque."

Buontempo said his remark was misunderstood and he wanted to see Gypsies become as fully integrated into mainstream society as Italian Jews. □

Shoah video archive project behind schedule on interviews

By Tom Tugend

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — Steven Spielberg's massive Holocaust video archive project is falling short of its goal to assemble 50,000 interviews with survivors by the year's end.

Michael Berenbaum, who has headed the project since January, accepts responsibility for the shortfall and says it results from changes in interviewing techniques and in expanding the types of survivors being questioned.

"We have retrained our interviewers," says Berenbaum, citing an example in which a slight change in approach can yield surprising results.

"We are currently interviewing people in their 60s, who were children during the Holocaust," he says. "In talking to one woman, we might have asked, 'What was your family life like before the war, when you were a 7-year-old girl?'"

"We would have gotten an answer, but it would have been from the perspective of a mature adult looking back on her childhood."

Instead, the interviewer shifted the perspective by requesting, "Take me around the family table during a Shabbat dinner. Where did your father sit? Where did your mother sit?"

Suddenly, Berenbaum recalls, the woman's face took on the radiance of Shabbat. She sounded like a 7-year-old as she relived the actual setting and experience.

The Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation has conducted close to 32,000 interviews in 29 languages and 44 countries.

Some 400 new interviews are being added each week.

The foundation was established three years ago by filmmaker Steven Spielberg, following his life-changing experience in directing "Schindler's List," to videotape eyewitness accounts of the Holocaust and create the largest multimedia archive of survivor testimonies ever assembled.

Berenbaum, who was named chief executive officer of the foundation in January, also has shifted the project to seek out interviews among survivor groups that until now have been reluctant to participate, such as fervently Orthodox Jews.

"They are deeply suspicious," says Berenbaum, "They don't know who Spielberg is, they distrust Hollywood."

Interviewing a 'great Chasidic master'

Berenbaum managed to persuade one of the "great Chasidic masters" to talk to him during a recent visit to New York. Their first session lasted more than five hours.

"The most painful thing for him to talk about was the first time he had to violate the Shabbat by being on a train taking him to Auschwitz," says Berenbaum.

"But he also spoke with great warmth about a Reform Jew, a Hungarian and fellow inmate, who managed to make potato soup for him each day so that he could keep kosher."

Berenbaum is also turning to other Holocaust victims in what he calls his "expansion category," such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Gypsies and homosexuals.

"Through these witnesses, we can learn what was singular to the Jewish experience and what we shared in common with others," he says.

The project's staff of over 200, working out of modest houses in converted trailers on the Universal Studios lot, expects to have 42,000 interviews completed by the end of the year, with the remaining 8,000 scheduled for 1998.

What will happen next will be decided by the foundation's board of directors in the fall.

"I think there will be a temptation to keep the interviews going until we have reached the last living survivor, but that decision will also depend on funding and other factors," says Berenbaum.

After raising \$45 million, the foundation is now launching a \$50 million fund drive. "To reach the goal, we have two enormous assets and one enormous liability," says Berenbaum.

"The first asset is the path-breaking nature of our work, and the second is the name and standing of Steven Spielberg," he adds. "Our liability is also Spielberg, with people asking why they need to contribute if he is around."

Berenbaum's answer is that the Shoah Foundation must have broad-based support to retain its credibility. All of Spielberg's personal profits from "Schindler's List" are going to another project he established, called the Righteous Persons Foundation.

However, Spielberg has put both his private resources, and a great deal of time and energy, into the Shoah Foundation.

"This year, Steven is busy with three feature films," says Berenbaum.

"Next year, he has promised to dedicate his time to his family and the Shoah Foundation." □

Thursday the rabbi met with NBA legend Kareem Abdul-Jabbar

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Thursday the rabbi met a basketball legend.

It was an emotional, albeit unlikely, meeting: former NBA basketball star Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Israel's chief Ashkenazi rabbi, Yisrael Meir Lau, linked by their connection to Buchenwald.

As a child, Lau survived the Buchenwald concentration camp, which a family friend of Abdul-Jabbar's had helped liberate.

The friend, Leonard Smith of New York, could not make the trip, but had urged Abdul-Jabbar to try to see the rabbi.

"He told me, if you ever get to Israel, we have friends there you should see," Abdul-Jabbar told reporters.

Lau told Abdul-Jabbar that he was almost 8 years old when the camp was liberated, and that he remembered black troops among those forces.

"The first black face I saw in my life was in the broken gates of Buchenwald," Lau told him.

The chief rabbi added that during the 1991 Crown Heights riots in New York, he had urged for unity between blacks and Jews.

"Just as they united in a time of war, they should be able to do so during times of peace," he said, adding, "It's time to forget all the differences and hold our hands together."

Abdul-Jabbar said he had learned about the role of African Americans in the liberation from the stories his father's friend told him, and he urged more awareness of this history. "It's fading from sight," he said.

Lau noted that there will be a reunion of survivors from Buchenwald and liberators in Washington in the beginning of September, and he invited Abdul-Jabbar to attend along with his father and family friend.

Abdul-Jabbar, who retired from the Los Angeles Lakers in 1989, was also taking part in a streetball competition sponsored by the Jerusalem municipality.

A convert to Islam, he said he planned to pray at a mosque on Friday. □