

NEWS AT A GLANCE

- **The World Jewish Congress is calling on the Vatican to open its archives for an examination of its wartime past.** The WJC issued the call after researchers found a declassified U.S. Treasury Department document claiming that the Vatican had stored 200 million Swiss Francs — worth about \$500 million today — for Croatian fascists after the end of World War II. [Page 2]
- **One of the non-Jewish names on the list of dormant pre-1945 accounts released by the Swiss sparked astonishment in some quarters.** Dr. Hans Wendland of Germany was the “mastermind in the trafficking of looted art between France and Switzerland,” according to the executive director of the World Jewish Congress, Elan Steinberg. [Page 1]
- **An Israeli investigation into the bridge collapse at the opening ceremony of the Maccabiah Games concluded that the construction was flawed, there was no overall design for the bridge, its building was not supervised and substandard materials were used.** The commission will submit its findings to the attorney general. [Page 3]
- **Israeli police have responded with “indifference” to complaints of death threats against Jehovah’s Witnesses, the U.S. State Department charged.** At the same time the department’s report on religious persecution worldwide credited Israeli authorities for promising to uphold the law if there was interference with anyone’s right to worship. [Page 4]
- **The Knesset took a preliminary legislative step toward a law that would make it extremely difficult to trade parts of the Golan Heights in a peace deal with Syria.** The legislation would make it necessary for 80 out of the 120 members of Israel’s Parliament to approve any territorial concessions on the Golan. [Page 4]
- **German President Roman Herzog kicked off a three-day Washington visit with a tour of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.** Herzog’s delegation includes Ignatz Bubis, the leader of Germany’s Jewish community.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES**Rising anti-Semitism casts shadow over publication of Swiss accounts***By Fredy Rom*

ZURICH (JTA) — Concerns about rising anti-Semitism in Switzerland have cast a pall over the much-publicized release of the names on dormant accounts from the Nazi era.

“Keep your money. The lists published today are not important if the 18,000-member Jewish minority of this country should suffer from anti-Semitism,” Israel Singer, the secretary-general of the World Jewish Congress, said during a news conference Wednesday.

Singer’s statement came on the day the Swiss Bankers Association published the names of some 1,750 dormant accounts in major newspapers in 27 countries, including the United States, Israel, France, Russia and Australia.

Singer spoke at a news conference called by the Swiss Bankers Association to announce the publication of the accounts, a move that many observers believe would never have happened without the strong international pressure that was spearheaded over the past two years by Jewish leaders and U.S. government officials.

The recent rise of anti-Semitic incidents in Switzerland is widely viewed here as a backlash to the Jewish efforts.

The publication of the accounts represent a dramatic overturning of Switzerland’s famed bank secrecy laws.

It is also an ironic twist of history: Switzerland enacted the laws in 1934 to help Jews who were fearful of Nazi reprisals place money in numbered accounts that would ensure the anonymity of depositors.

But after the war, the heirs to many of those accounts got snared by a host of banking technicalities that made the task of recovering family assets virtually impossible. Many of the heirs lost their relatives to the Nazi genocide.

The names and last known address of the account holders were printed in fine print on two pages of The New York Times on Wednesday. The ad invited claimants to “Please come forward. You will receive prompt and serious attention.”

One of the non-Jewish names on the list sparked astonishment in some quarters.

Dr. Hans Wendland of Germany was the “mastermind in the trafficking of looted art between France and Switzerland,” according to WJC’s executive director, Elan Steinberg, who said the name “jumped out” when WJC officials were scanning the list.

“He was a notorious figure,” Steinberg said, “assuming it is the same Hans Wendland.”

The nuts and bolts

The ads direct prospective claimants to contact the offices of the international accounting firm Ernst & Young, which will be processing inquiries at their branches in New York, Tel Aviv, Sydney, Australia, Budapest and Basel, Switzerland.

The ads list telephone numbers for the offices, as well as a form for requesting an information kit about the claims process.

Arbitrators will “evaluate claims under a relaxed standard of proof,” the ad says. “Claims to published accounts will be resolved as soon as possible with a deadline of one year.”

The list, along with request forms, is also available on the World Wide Web: www.dormantaccounts.ch

The accounts listed were opened by non-Swiss citizens.

Another list of accounts opened by Swiss citizens, many of whom may have acted as proxies for Jews fearful of reprisals, is slated to be released in the fall.

Most of the depositors on the list released Wednesday had addresses in Germany, France and Austria; many of them had surnames that were likely of Jewish origin.

A spokesman at the Ernst & Young office in Basel reported a heavy response on the first day the ad appeared. “We had high traffic, and the

numbers in various countries have been busy all day long," the spokesman said Wednesday.

In Budapest, the head of the auditing firm, Tamas Szabo, said that on the first day the list was published, there were calls not only from Hungary, but also from Russia, Romania, the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

"Every five minutes there is a call, and we have already found one Hungarian person" who has a basis for filing a claim, he said. But he would not release the name.

The accounts published this week have a total value of \$42 million, George Krayner, president of the Swiss Bankers Association, told the news conference announcing the accounts.

Representatives of the association, in testimony last fall before a U.S. congressional panel, had said they could only locate 775 accounts worth about \$32 million. Jewish groups have charged that Swiss banks are holding up to \$7 billion in assets deposited by Jews during the World War II era.

At the news conference, Singer called on the members of the Swiss government and leading opinion makers to be more outspoken in condemning the rising tide of resentment against the Swiss Jewish community, a trend that has become increasingly evident in recent months.

"It is not money alone that we have come for, it is the issue of moral restitution," Singer said. "We want to hear your voices."

"We know that the Jewish people in this country are again afraid. If this is the price of our efforts to bring justice to the Holocaust victims, I feel shame for the Swiss people."

Singer's call was seconded by Jewish Agency for Israel Chairman Avraham Burg, who has been closely involved in restitution efforts. "I represent another generation of Jews who are living in an independent state. I tell you: The Jewish people of today will never let it happen again," Burg said, referring to the Holocaust.

In New York, Steinberg of the WJC stressed that the Swiss "have to fight anti-Semitism and turn over the money."

"The Swiss government is responsible for the safety of the Jewish community," Steinberg said, adding that the Jews there "will not be held hostage for this money."

A pledge to fight anti-Semitism

In Washington, the Swiss ambassador to the United States, Alfred Defago, said in a telephone interview that his government was committed to fighting anti-Semitism with "no ifs, ands or buts."

"If there is a rising tide of anti-Semitism, we should fight it very clearly," he said.

"We will do everything we can to combat anti-Semitism and every form of racism in Switzerland."

Responding to the publication of the lists, Thomas Lyssy, vice president of the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities, said he welcomed the banks' step, but worried that it came too late for some elderly Holocaust survivors.

"We urge the banks to hurry up" so as many as possible can "profit from the funds," he said.

But Gerhart Riegner, honorary vice president of the World Jewish Congress, was skeptical. "I do not believe the Swiss banks anymore. They lied too much," said Riegner, who in 1942 issued an urgent cable warning of the Holocaust.

"Maybe it is a new start, but I doubt it." □

(Contributing to this report were JTA Editor Lisa Hostein and Foreign Editor Mitchell Danow in New York, and correspondent Agnes Bohm in Budapest.)

WJC calls on Vatican to open archives in wake of document

By Mitchell Danow

NEW YORK (JTA) — The World Jewish Congress is calling on the Vatican to open its archives for an examination of its wartime past.

The WJC issued the call Wednesday after researchers found a declassified U.S. Treasury Department document claiming that the Vatican had stored 200 million Swiss francs — worth about \$500 million today — for Croatian fascists after World War II.

In addition to opening the archives, the "Vatican should establish a commission to look into their wartime past — as 16 other countries have done — in view of this incredible documentation," said Elan Steinberg, WJC's executive director.

"The pope, who has recognized Israel and condemned anti-Semitism, can exert the moral authority to overcome petty bureaucrats who are trying to keep the archives closed and who, in their reaction to the disclosure, sound like a caricature of a Swiss banker," Steinberg said.

His comments came after the Vatican flatly denied that the declassified document had any validity.

"These reports have no basis in reality," chief Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls said in a statement issued Tuesday.

"The information, which is without any documentation, is only based on 'a reliable source in Italy' which, even if it existed, remains unidentified and of dubious authority."

This is not the first time the Vatican's role in the Holocaust has been questioned. The Vatican has been accused of helping Nazis escape after the war through a so-called pipeline.

Convicted Nazis such as Klaus Barbie, the "butcher of Lyon," and SS Capt. Erich Priebke, who was convicted of war crimes this week in Italy, were among those whose escapes reportedly were aided by the Vatican.

The document in question, dated Oct. 21, 1946, was made public on Monday by A&E Television Networks, which said producers had found it while doing research for a documentary.

In the document, U.S. Treasury official Emerson Bigelow stated that Croatian fascists spirited about 350 million Swiss francs out of Yugoslavia after the war and that the British impounded only some 150 million.

The document quoted a "reliable source in Italy" that the rest of the money was held in the Vatican "for safekeeping."

"According to rumor, a considerable portion" of the money held by the Vatican "has been sent to Spain and Argentina through the Vatican's 'pipeline,'" the document said, "but it is quite possible this is merely a smokescreen to cover the fact that the treasure remains in its original repository" in the Vatican. □

(JTA correspondent Ruth Gruber in Rome contributed to this report.)

Swiss man jailed for anti-Semitism

ZURICH (JTA) — A Swiss man has been sentenced to two months in prison for violating the country's racial hatred laws.

The District Court last week handed down the sentence against Erwin Kessler, who wrote in a brochure that the Jewish ritual slaughter of meat is equivalent to the Nazi killing of Jews during World War II.

The judges said that they had no choice but to send Kessler to jail, since they believed there was little likelihood that he would change his views. □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Petition on religious councils not affecting conversion issue

By Michele Chabin

JERUSALEM (JTA) — One month after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu established a committee to find a compromise on Jewish conversions, the question of how to register those who have undergone a non-Orthodox conversion in Israel remains unresolved, according to those close to the negotiations.

Faced with an Aug. 15 deadline, the seven-member committee has been meeting five times a week in an attempt to find a solution that would be acceptable to its Orthodox, Conservative and Reform members.

The committee was set up after the non-Orthodox movements agreed to suspend litigation pending before Israel's High Court of Justice and the government suspended legislative action on a bill that would legalize the Orthodox establishment's sole authority over Jewish conversions conducted in Israel.

In the meantime, the Reform and Conservative movements have returned to court on another religious matter. "We never promised to curtail legal action on other fronts," said Rabbi Uri Regev, director of the Reform movement's Israel Religious Action Center.

The two liberal movements jointly filed a petition to the High Court on July 10 demanding that it force the Ministry of Religious Affairs to permit non-Orthodox representatives to sit on four local religious councils in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Haifa and Tivon.

The court has ruled since 1992 on four separate occasions that representatives cannot be barred from religious councils on the basis of their religious beliefs. But no religious council has permitted a Reform or Conservative representative to participate in its proceedings.

"The Ministry of Religious Affairs acts as if it doesn't have to accept the rulings," said Rabbi Reuven Hammer, the Conservative representative on the conversion committee. "There is no reason in the world we should sit back and let this happen."

'An act of exasperation'

Ministry of Justice officials responsible for enforcing the court rulings "have thrown up their arms in despair, saying there was nothing they could do," said Regev, the Reform representative on the committee.

"This petition was an act of exasperation, made only after exhausting all other avenues," he said.

Hammer said the petition "didn't affect the negotiations" on the conversion issue.

Rabbi Dov Frimer, one of the committee's five Orthodox representatives, agreed.

"If someone had asked me in advance whether this [petition] was appropriate, I might have counseled against it. However, I'm pleased to say that the committee members didn't allow the issues to become confused."

Although the committee members and others close to the negotiations are keeping an extremely tight lid on the proceedings, representatives from all three streams say the atmosphere during the meetings has been both professional and good-natured.

"There has been a real openness in terms of a search" for a compromise, said Frimer.

Regev said the committee has been "hearing testimonies from key figures in the Reform, Conservative and Orthodox communities, both in Israel and abroad, as well as Knesset members and government officials."

In addition to the testimony, the committee has sought and received input from ordinary citizens.

"We've received dozens of [letters] from people,

and every single one has been given to each committee member without censorship," said Bobby Brown, the prime minister's adviser on Diaspora affairs.

"In some cases, people were asked to provide further information or to appear before the committee."

Brown refused to elaborate on the letters' contents.

Brown, who along with Third Way Knesset Member Alexander Lubotsky helped broker the "cease-fire" between Orthodox and non-Orthodox leaders that permitted the committee's formation, said the members are taking their duties very seriously. Referring to Ya'acov Ne'eman, who was named finance minister shortly after assuming the role of committee chairman, Brown said, "Ne'eman accepted the post of finance minister on the condition that he could continue heading the committee.

"When one of the highest-ranking ministers takes such a stand, it signals the committee's importance."

If the committee develops a compromise, the proposal will then be presented to the governing coalition, which will have three weeks to accept or reject it.

If accepted, the Knesset would likely pass a law codifying the new procedures for recognizing non-Orthodox converts who undergo conversions in Israel.

If rejected, the non-Orthodox movements are expected to reactivate their conversion-related court cases. The Orthodox parties would likely pursue the contentious conversion bill, which requires two more Knesset votes before it can become law. □

Investigation faults many for Maccabiah bridge collapse

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Last week's collapse of a pedestrian bridge at the Maccabiah Games was caused by a chain of failures involving the bridge's planning and construction.

This was the finding released Wednesday by a public commission that investigated the collapse, which caused the death of two Australian athletes.

The commission did not recommend legal action against those involved in building the bridge.

Instead, it will present its findings to Attorney General Elyakim Rubinstein, who will decide whether to launch a criminal investigation.

In addition to the deaths, more than 60 athletes were injured when the bridge buckled beneath them as they waited to march into the Ramat Gan stadium where the games' opening ceremony was being held.

During questioning by police and the commission, officials involved in the bridge's planning and construction traded accusations over responsibility for the collapse.

Despite the attempts to shift blame, the commission of inquiry found fault at all levels, from the engineer to the contracting company that built the bridge to the Maccabiah organizing committee.

The commission concluded that the engineer, Micha Bar Ilan, had never submitted an engineering plan for the bridge, did not design a bridge to meet the intended needs and did not properly oversee the work.

The contracting company, Karagula-Ben Ezra, was faulted for doing shoddy work, using substandard materials and being unauthorized to build such a structure.

The commission also said there was no coordination between the engineer and the contractors. In addition, the commission blamed the Maccabiah organizers for the poor coordination that led up to the tragedy.

The commission rejected the suggestion that the collapse was caused by a number of small all-terrain vehicles that drove over the bridge shortly before the opening ceremony. □

Arab attacker enters hospital as family denies ties to Hamas*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — An Israeli Arab who drove his car into a group of British tourists and stabbed two people in Jaffa has been admitted to a hospital with a torn spleen.

The 31-year-old man from Nazareth had been apprehended immediately after the attack Tuesday night.

Members of his family denied reports that he was affiliated with the Hamas fundamentalist group. They said he had gone out of control because of family problems.

According to reports, a group of British youth from a Zionist federation tour were standing on a sidewalk in Jaffa, the ancient city adjacent to Tel Aviv, when the man drove his car into them.

Eight to 10 youths were lightly injured. The man then got out of the car, drew a knife and tried to stab a mother and daughter who were in a nearby restaurant.

An off-duty border police guard drew his gun and subdued the attacker, who was arrested. The injured people were taken to area hospitals. Though four of the injured people told police they believed the incident had to do with an argument over a parking space, investigators are treating it as a terrorist attack.

A security source was quoted by the Ha'aretz newspaper as saying that information had been received recently regarding a planned terrorist attack by a Nazareth resident in Tel Aviv.

The British youth were part of a Jewish Agency for Israel-sponsored "Israel Experience" program whose participants had just arrived in Israel when the incident occurred. Jewish Agency officials said the British group resumed their planned activities on Wednesday. □

Knesset moves on legislation opposing withdrawal from Golan*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The Israeli Knesset has taken a first — albeit challenged — vote toward making it difficult to give up any of the Golan Heights in a peace deal with Syria.

The bill, sponsored by Tsomet Knesset member Modi Zandberg, would require a majority of 80 in the 120-member parliament to change the law annexing the area. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he did not expect the bill's passage to present further obstacles in talks with Damascus, which have been suspended for more than a year. He said the Golan Heights was an issue of national importance, and any decision on the area's future would require national consensus.

Opposition members have demanded a revote.

They accused Knesset speaker Dan Tichon of holding the vote amid a period of pandemonium in the Knesset. Tichon rejected the charges, but he agreed to review a videotape of the vote to determine whether to hold another ballot. Just before the vote, a similar bill was defeated in a tie of 50-50.

But opposition members claimed that as they were celebrating that victory, Tichon called the second vote. While the reading of the first bill was a roll call, the reading of the second bill was electronic, and many members did not have time to get back to their seats.

In the confusion, Meretz Knesset member Chaim Oron said he mistakenly voted for the bill, which passed in a first reading 43-40, with two abstentions.

The vote was the first of three votes necessary for it to become law.

In another twist, members of the Netanyahu

government voted for Zandberg's Golan bill, despite a reported coalition decision to oppose it.

Netanyahu rejected suggestions of lack of coalition discipline, saying that the coalition members had been given freedom to vote as they wished. □

State Department charges Israel with persecuting Christian group*By Matthew Dorf*

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Israeli police have responded with "indifference" to complaints of death threats against Jehovah's Witnesses, the U.S. State Department charged in a report released this week.

"Members of Jehovah's Witnesses have reported being followed, and have also reported death threats," the State Department said in a report on religious persecution of Christians around the world.

"Police have occasionally evinced indifference to complaints, sometimes alleging that members of Jehovah's Witnesses proselytize without a permit (although there is no requirement or provision under Israeli law for such a permit)."

Israeli officials could not be reached for comment on the report. Congress had asked the State Department to report on worldwide persecution of Christians as part of its effort to address challenges to religious freedom abroad.

The report is also part of a larger State Department effort to monitor religious persecution worldwide.

The report criticized China for the most severe restrictions on Christian worshipers, including raiding worship services. Advocates of religious freedom hope that having the State Department's imprimatur on charges of religious discrimination will aid them in their quest.

The 86-page report also included a brief section on religious freedom in 78 countries. In the report, the State Department credited Israeli authorities for promising that they would "act to uphold the law if there was any further interference with anyone's right to worship."

The report described a March 8, 1997, incident in which "a mob of over 250 haredim (ultra-conservative Orthodox Jews)" attacked a meeting hall of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Lod, "broke into the building, destroyed the interior, and burned religious literature, books and furnishings."

The report says the State Department had "expected active prosecution" of the perpetrators, rather than the warning that they received. The report also touches briefly on a bill that was being considered by the Knesset that would ban all forms of proselytizing. □

Disc promotes killing Jews*By Fredy Rom*

BERN (JTA) — A new compact disc calling for the murder of Jews is in circulation in the skinhead communities of Germany, Austria and Switzerland.

One of the songs on the disc is titled, "Put a Knife in a Jew's Body."

"I take this public call to kill Jews very seriously," Ignatz Bubis, head of Germany's Central Council of Jews, said in an interview Sunday.

German prosecutors launched an investigation of extreme rightists who they suspect distributed the disc.

Anti-Jewish material is banned in Germany.

The head of the Swiss police in Bern warned recently that skinheads may launch an attack during next month's ceremony in Basel marking the 100th anniversary of the first Zionist Congress.

The Swiss army is being mobilized to help local police provide security for the event. □