



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ The U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Bill Richardson, pledged a "renewed commitment" to securing a spot for Israel in the Western European and Others Group of the United Nations. [Page 2]

■ Israel and the Palestinians agreed to resume joint committee discussions on a safe-passage route between the West Bank and Gaza Strip and on a Palestinian seaport. The announcement was made following talks between Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy and the Palestinian Authority's Nabil Sha'ath. [Page 3]

■ The presence of an ancient cemetery could further delay the construction of Jewish housing in a plot of land in an Arab neighborhood of Jerusalem. The granting of a municipal permit was earlier suspended after left-wing members of the city council challenged the legality of the building approval. [Page 3]

■ Hungarians who are possible heirs to dormant World War II-era Swiss bank accounts are afraid to come forward for fear of reprisals from the descendants of Nazis or criminals. According to the Budapest office of the accounting firm of Ernst & Young, which is handling the claims, many callers refuse to give their telephone numbers.

■ The Union Bank of Switzerland said some of the documents saved from its shredder earlier this year related to the sale of properties sold by Jews under the Nazis. The bank fired Christoph Meili for saving the documents from the shredder.

■ Israeli Knesset speaker Dan Tichon said a vote last week to fortify the Golan law will stand. Opposition members had accused Tichon of announcing the vote on the bill, which requires a special Knesset majority of 80 to change the law annexing the Golan, when no one was listening.

■ The U.S. State Department began seeking congressional support for a law that allows U.S. aid to the Palestinians. The act will expire Aug. 12 unless Congress passes an extension.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Around the world, relatives seek Swiss bank account claims

By Michele Chabin

JERUSALEM (JTA) — When the Swiss Bankers Association published its long-awaited list of dormant World War II-era bank accounts here last week, 82-year-old Dov Haber found what he was looking for.

Buried in the tiny print was the name of Haber's uncle, Hermann Roth, who lived in Vienna before the war.

As soon as he saw the name, Haber headed to the Tel Aviv office of Kost, Levary and Forer, the local accounting firm dealing with Holocaust claims.

Interviewed outside the office, Haber, a retired bookkeeper, said, "I looked for my uncle after the war. I looked for everyone after the war, including my parents, but there was no one left."

Haber, who served in the Polish army during World War II before escaping to Switzerland, said he had come to the firm "to find out what happened to my family and what I should do next."

Haber was one of 500 people in Israel — and one of several thousand worldwide — seeking information about how to obtain possible restitution from the dormant Swiss accounts in the first days after the list of some 1,800 account holders was published in newspapers around the world.

The publication of the accounts represents a dramatic overturning of Switzerland's famed bank secrecy laws.

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.

After months of international pressure, the Swiss banks last week unveiled the list of accounts in paid newspaper advertisements in 28 countries.

The ad invited claimants to "Please come forward. You will receive prompt and serious attention."

The response has been strong, and constant.

In the international accounting offices of Ernst & Young, the primary firm handling the claims, the phones have been ringing incessantly.

In New York, some 3,000 calls have come in since the list was published July 23.

Calling the flow "busy, but manageable," Michael Freitag, a spokesman for the Swiss Bankers Association, said most of the callers to Ernst & Young were seeking the information kits needed in order to file a claim.

Questions still remain

And there has been widespread curiosity even among those without any potential claims.

But those with possible claims are clearly most affected — even though the amount of the accounts remains a big question mark.

In Budapest, the Liub family has been quiet about their discovery that they are heirs to a long-dormant account of Kalman Liub, one of 32 Hungarians on the list.

"We don't want to toast before we kill the bear," said Kalman's great-nephew, Nandor Liub, 77, using an expression that means the family doesn't want to celebrate prematurely.

The Liubs, who are not Jewish, are not alone in wanting to keep quiet.

The Hungarian Jews on the list are mostly silent, their fears stoked by decades of Nazi and Communist oppression.

Some Hungarian Jews apparently believe that they could be harassed by relatives of the Nazis who appear on the list or by criminals who will attempt extortion.

Some also fear that upon learning that they have stumbled upon

money, friends, or even cash-poor Jewish organizations, may ask them for a loan.

According to Tamas Szabo, the coordinator of account claims at Ernst & Young's Budapest office, which is handling calls mainly from Central and Eastern Europe, many of the would-be applicants have even refused to give his office their telephone numbers for fear of reprisal, a fear he dismissed as "irrational."

Szabo estimates there have been 220 serious calls to his office since the list was published last week.

In Moscow, in contrast, there seemed little fear of reprisals among the Jews examining the list of accounts at the Choral Synagogue.

It was unlikely that many of the Jews who examined the three pages published in the daily *Izvestia* would find names of family members — only about 30 of the account holders were from the former Soviet Union.

One man, who gave his name as Semyon, seemed quite certain that his family held no Swiss bank account.

Still, Semyon, a retiree in his 60s, said the publication signified an important step toward justice.

"They were killed," he said of the account holders, "and the bankers should not benefit from their death."

And while few of the accounts listed the Soviet Union as the address, tens of thousands of Jews now living in the former Soviet Union were born in Eastern Europe, said Zinoviy Kagan, a leader of Russia's Reform Jews.

Russia's leading daily financial newspaper, *Kommersant Daily*, announced a campaign Friday to locate heirs to these Jews.

In Israel, the media has been relatively quiet.

With the exception of a few features about the list, and the fact that many of those listed are not Jewish, it has devoted itself to other matters. The lack of coverage, however, should not be taken as a barometer of public interest.

Last Friday morning, hundreds of people from all walks of life took the time to glance at the claims list, mounted prominently in a storefront window on busy Ben-Yehuda Street in Jerusalem.

Regardless of whether their families were personally affected by the Holocaust, those interviewed during an informal opinion poll said they expected the Swiss banks to make amends.

The Jewish heritage

"We're from Morocco originally, and no one in my family died in the Holocaust," said 28-year-old Natalie Shitrit, who recently immigrated to Israel from France.

"Even so, I think it's important that people get what's rightfully theirs. The Holocaust is part of our collective heritage."

Edna Blecher, 53, who owns a Jerusalem gift shop, said the publication of the claims list had sparked "an important discussion" in her household.

She said her sons, ages 30 and 26, began asking many questions about the war and how the family was affected by it.

"It's not that we kept this a secret, but the list definitely opened up a whole new line of communication," Blecher said.

While the list — and the issues of compensation surrounding it — has heightened the younger generation's understanding of the Holocaust, it has also heightened the anxiety level of many Holocaust survivors.

According to John Lemberger, director of AMCHA, an organization that provides counseling services to Holocaust survivors, "The list has created a lot of anticipation and apprehension among survivors.

"There were expectations based on the media

hype. People expected this to be a full and honest disclosure," but were disappointed with the numbers and the fact that many of the people on the list weren't even Jewish.

Lemberger said many Holocaust survivors, whether or not they have filed a claim, have been pained by the publicity surrounding the Swiss bank accounts.

He said AMCHA therapists around the country have found that the issue of the dormant Swiss accounts has been a "major subject of conversation for the past couple of months."

"This kind of thing arouses a lot of unhealed traumas and pain, and you don't necessarily have to be a holder of a dormant account to feel it," he said.

Shai Csillag, director general of the Center of Organizations of the Holocaust, said the prevailing emotion among many in his umbrella organization is anger.

"Of those who would have benefited most, many are probably not with us anymore," said Csillag, a Holocaust survivor from Hungary. "People needed that money while they were alive, and the money could have given them a better life. This list comes 50 years too late." □

(JTA correspondents Michael Jordan and Agnes Bohm in Budapest and Lev Krichevsky in Moscow contributed to this story.)

Ambassador: U.S. will wait, then push for Israel at the U.N.

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The United States will wait until the "dust settles" before seeking allied support for Israeli membership in a United Nations regional grouping.

"Timing is going to be very crucial. We ought to let the dust settle" from the General Assembly condemnation of Israel for building at Har Homa and the Security Council resolutions that condemned Israel, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Bill Richardson said Monday.

U.S. Reps. Steve Rothman (D-N.J.) and Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.) met with Richardson to urge him to work toward gaining a seat for Israel in a regional grouping at the United Nations.

Arab states have barred Israel from the Middle Eastern groups, and European countries have blocked Israel from entering the Western European and Others Group.

Membership in a regional group is necessary to serve on certain U.N. committees and have a shot at a rotating Security Council seat.

Richardson said he would resume the push for Israeli membership in the Western European group when the General Assembly reopens in the fall.

When asked if U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan supports the effort, Richardson said he has asked Annan for his backing. Annan "wants to see Israel participate more actively at the U.N.," Richardson said.

"The secretary-general is working on this," Richardson said, but Annan has not explicitly endorsed the effort.

The United States has labored in vain in the past to secure Israel a regional grouping slot, but Richardson said there is a chance that a new concerted effort will succeed.

He called on Israel's friends to "encourage" Austria, Italy and Spain, among others, to support Israel in this regard. So far only Great Britain and Germany have endorsed Israeli membership in the group.

"This is an issue that cuts to the heart of fairness at the United Nations," Rothman said. "It's time to end the second-class citizen status of Israel at the U.N.," he said, "particularly given the last few months of rabid anti-Israel activities." □

Peace talks set to resume as Jerusalem project stalls*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — With Israeli-Palestinian talks seemingly back on track, an Israeli government committee has put a hold on plans to erect Jewish housing in Jerusalem's Ras al-Amud neighborhood.

An agreement to renew joint committee discussions on establishing a safe passage route between the West Bank and Gaza Strip and on building a Gaza port was announced Monday after Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy and Palestinian Authority minister Nabil Sha'ath met in Jerusalem.

A committee dealing with opening a Palestinian airport in Gaza has already resumed negotiations.

Their meeting, a follow-up to Levy's discussions last week with Sha'ath and Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat, came amid reports that the United States was working on a new initiative to revive Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

Speaking to reporters, Levy said Sha'ath assured him that the Palestinians were taking all necessary measures to deal with the alleged involvement of Palestinian police in terrorism. "Steps are being taken, arrests have been made," Levy said. "Mr. Sha'ath informed me of this, in the name of Chairman Arafat."

Earlier this month, Israeli security forces detained three Palestinian policemen from the Nablus area suspected of being on their way to carry out a terrorist attack at a nearby Jewish settlement.

Israel has alleged that senior Palestinian security officials were involved in planning the attack. At least one official was detained by the Palestinians.

Sha'ath said he reiterated to Levy the Palestinian commitments to prevent "all acts that would injure, harm or create violence against Israelis and against Palestinians."

Israeli-Palestinian talks broke off in mid-March after Israel broke ground for a Jewish neighborhood at Har Homa in southeastern Jerusalem. The Palestinians have demanded a halt to building in eastern Jerusalem as a condition for restarting the negotiations.

Halt to proposed construction

On Monday, a Knesset committee suspended an American developer's municipal permits to build Jewish housing in the Ras al-Amud neighborhood in eastern Jerusalem. Building could be further delayed after archaeologists said that an ancient cemetery occupies the site.

Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert last week authorized permits for the construction of some 70 housing units on a plot of land purchased by American philanthropist Dr. Irving Moskowitz. But Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu pledged Sunday to block the start of the project, and he was quick to convey, via an aide, to Arafat that he did not intend to move ahead with construction.

While stressing that the government was firmly committed to building in Jerusalem, Netanyahu said that the project's timing was inappropriate.

Two Meretz members of the Jerusalem city council appealed to the Interior Ministry to halt the project.

The suspension will remain in effect until a Jerusalem district court rules in about two weeks on the legality of the permits.

Members of the Knesset interior committee visited the planned construction site, on a sloping hill beneath the Mount of Olives and overlooking Jerusalem's Old City, and were split over the project.

Committee chairman Salah Tarif of the Labor Party said he opposed the project because of its potential for conflict.

"This is the center of a concentrated Palestinian Arab area," he told Israel Radio. "Why bring some 100 Jews" into the center of an Arab population of more than 11,000, he asked.

Knesset member Binyamin Alon of the nationalist Moledet Party rejected arguments that the projected building would be in the heart of an Arab area.

"This is the most traditional [Jewish] burial site, the Mount of Olives," he said. "The property we are standing on was under Jewish hands for more than 100 years."

The Israel Antiquities Authority said archaeologists would have to determine whether there are ancient Jewish graves on the site, a procedure that would further delay construction if the court upholds the building permits.

Uri Ben Asher, the city engineer, told the Knesset members that the municipal building permits were legal — and only a few technical matters would have to be worked out for construction to start if the court rejects the appeal.

Attorney Yehiel Gutman, who represents Moskowitz in Israel, said there were no legal problems with the plan. □

Sale of Mount Davidson Cross likely to end church-state suit*By Natalie Weinstein**Jewish Bulletin of Northern California*

SAN FRANCISCO (JTA) — Voters of all faiths will likely have the final say on the fate of the Mount Davidson Cross — the towering Christian symbol that has divided San Francisco since a lawsuit rejecting its presence on city land was filed seven years ago.

San Francisco last week auctioned off the 103-foot cross and four-tenths of an acre of parkland surrounding it. The Council of Armenian American Organizations of Northern California won with a \$26,000 bid.

The San Francisco Board of Supervisors will be asked Aug. 4 to accept the sale and place it on November's ballot.

If voters approve the sale, the 1990 lawsuit that led to the auction will likely be settled. If voters reject the sale, the city could, in the end, be forced to raze the cross.

A local Armenian-American organization plans to preserve the cross as a landmark and a place for reflection.

The council also hopes to adopt the cross as a monument to the Armenian genocide at the hands of the Turks in 1915.

The Armenian-American council beat out a \$25,000 bid by the Friends of Mount Davidson Conservancy and a \$20,000 bid by the Museum of the City of San Francisco.

The lawsuit that led to Monday's auction was filed by nine San Franciscans of various faiths.

The plaintiffs claimed the cross's presence on city-owned land violated the separation of church and state. The city argued that the 63-year-old cross was a historical landmark akin to the Golden Gate Bridge.

In March, the U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear the city's appeal of a 1996 ruling by the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals that declared the cross's placement on public land unconstitutional. Mariam Morley, the deputy city attorney in charge of the lawsuit, said the preconditions of sale included maintaining the property as open space and open to the public.

The Armenian-American council will now be added as a defendant to the 1990 lawsuit.

Fred Blum, an American Jewish Congress attorney who represents the plaintiffs, said several remaining issues need to be worked out with the council before the lawsuit can be settled. □

NEWS ANALYSIS**Battle over Russian religion bill signals struggle with democracy***By Lev Krichevsky*

MOSCOW (JTA) — A president agonizes over whether to sign a bill.

It is popular, but under attack from human rights groups, who call it discriminatory and undemocratic, and from his allies, who threaten to cut aid if the bill becomes law.

With the Parliament in recess, the president decides to veto the law and send it back to the legislature.

The communities who would be affected by the legislation are split over the decision.

A mundane occurrence in a democratic country, right?

Yes, but this time the country is Russia — and the issue is freedom of religion.

As the fight over the legislation, titled "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Association," shows, Russia's struggle with democracy is an uphill one.

At issue here is how to ensure basic freedoms intrinsic to any democratic nation — such as freedom of religion — in a land that has a long undemocratic tradition.

Indeed some opponents of the legislation said that by vetoing the bill, Yeltsin has prevented Russia from returning to its totalitarian past.

At the same time, those who hailed the decision — including several Russian and American Jewish groups — cautioned that the battle is not yet over.

Until his surprise announcement last week, it appeared that Russian President Boris Yeltsin would sign the controversial legislation.

Ostensibly designed to protect Russia from the threat of religious cults and sects, the law calls Russian Orthodoxy an "inalienable part" of Russia. It allots to four established faiths — the Russian Orthodox Church, Islam, Buddhism and Judaism — the status of "traditional" Russian religions.

All other religions are required to prove that they have officially existed in Russia for at least 15 years, even though under the Communist regime religious freedom was harshly restricted and many religions had to operate clandestinely.

Reports indicated Yeltsin would sign

Religions, or denominations of religions, that cannot meet the 15-year requirement could face limitations on their ability to obtain a legal identity, own property or publish literature.

The bill was passed by overwhelming majorities in both houses of the Russian Parliament earlier this month and was actively supported by the Russian Orthodox Church.

Reports from the Kremlin last week had suggested Yeltsin would sign the law, but try to modify its more restrictive clauses.

But in the end, he vetoed it.

Yeltsin, who issued his decision while on vacation, was quoted as saying that he is obligated to guarantee the constitution.

"It was a difficult decision, but many of the features of the draft infringe on the constitutional rights and freedoms of people and citizens, establish inequality of different confessions and contradict international obligations accepted by Russia."

Human rights groups and the Vatican had attacked the bill, saying it went far beyond its stated goals of protecting Russia from cults that have gained popularity in recent years.

Critics of the bill described it as discriminatory against most religions — evangelical Christianity and Catholicism were among the faiths that could have been restricted — and said its provisions would handicap the activities of a number of foreign and non-mainstream religions now active in Russia.

The proposed law also sparked fear among some Jewish activists who worried that it could threaten the activities of branches of Judaism, such as the Lubavitch and the Reform movement, which did not enjoy official status in the former Soviet Union and, therefore, could not meet the 15-year requirement.

Father Gleb Yakunin, who heads the Public Committee to Protect Freedom of Conscience, said the veto was largely due to the West's opposition to the bill.

The U.S. Senate had threatened to cut Russia's \$200 million aid package if it became law.

Human rights activists were swift in applauding Yeltsin's decision.

"We are very happy with the decision," said Diederik Lohman, Moscow director of the Human Rights Watch/Helsinki group.

But among Jewish groups, there appeared to be a split.

Several Jewish groups had protested the legislation, including the Va'ad, the Jewish Federation of Russia.

But Russia's chief rabbi, Adolph Shayevich, had supported the bill. Shayevich said that although the draft contained "some imperfections," it was worthy of presidential approval.

Although Shayevich did not participate in a news conference in Moscow last week organized by the Russian Orthodox Church to express its disappointment over the veto, he said he agreed with the church representatives who stressed Russia's need to weed out what they described as dangerous foreign-based sects.

Other Jewish leaders welcomed Yeltsin's veto.

'A victory for democracy'

Zinoviy Kogan, leader of Moscow's Hineini, Russia's largest Reform congregation, called it a "victory of democratic forces."

And Berel Lazar, chief emissary of the Lubavitch movement in Russia, said, "We support completely the veto."

Lazar said that while Jewish groups could have benefited from the bill — since it put restrictions on organizations such as Jews for Jesus that have been very active in the former Soviet Union — he believed that such monitoring is not the job of government.

In Washington, Mark Levin, the executive director of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry, praised Yeltsin's veto, but cautioned that this is just "the first step."

Indeed, the fight is far from over.

Yeltsin's veto sets the stage for a confrontation with Parliament, which is likely to gain the two-thirds majority necessary to override his veto when it meets again in September.

According to the Russian Constitution, if the veto is overridden in both houses, the president has to sign the bill into law.

But Yeltsin could again refuse to sign the bill and send it back to Parliament, which is what he did with the recent "trophy art" bill, which prevents Russia from giving back art to Germany and other European countries looted after World War II.

Should the battle over the law be referred to the Constitutional Court, Yeltsin may invoke the constitution's Article 14, which contains guarantees of freedom of religion. □