

NEWS AT A GLANCE

- **U.S. special envoy Dennis Ross is slated to meet with Israeli and Palestinian delegations in Washington this week.** The meetings are in preparation for U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's planned visit to the Middle East next week.
- **A fifth Israeli soldier died as a result of injuries suffered during a brush fire in southern Lebanon last week.** The soldiers were killed and six others injured when they were trapped in a fire following a battle with Syrian-allied Amal gunmen. A commission is investigating the deaths.
- **An American man who underwent an Orthodox conversion in Metairie, La., was denied an official marriage in Israel last week on the grounds that his conversion may not have been legitimate.** [Page 3]
- **Canada revoked the citizenship of an alleged Nazi war criminal who was a former officer in the Royal Hungarian Police.** Ladislaus Csizsik-Csatory, who allegedly turned over Jews to be deported to Auschwitz, will be allowed to remain in Canada until federal authorities are able to legally deport him.
- **Leni Riefenstahl, known for her documentaries used by the Nazis for propaganda purposes, was awarded a lifetime film award in California.** The Simon Wiesenthal Center was among those who condemned the award, saying that it was impossible to separate Riefenstahl's art from her politics.
- **The investigation into the two men accused of plotting to bomb New York's subway system has not found any evidence that they were linked to a known terrorist organization.** The two suspects, whose apartment was found littered with anti-American and anti-Jewish literature, were indicted last week.
- **The European Union said it was considering ways to provide funds to the Palestinians in the wake of Israeli economic sanctions.** The announcement came after meetings with Palestinian officials. The sanctions came after a double suicide bombing in Jerusalem.

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD**Commemoration of Vilna Gaon prompts debate over Lithuania***By Rebecca Phillips*

NEW YORK (JTA) — A Lithuanian Talmudic scholar is stirring up controversy among Jews 200 years after his death.

September marks the 200th *yahrzeit* of the Vilna Gaon, the renowned commentator on the Talmud and the Torah and the major opponent of the burgeoning Chasidic movement in the Baltic area during the late 18th century.

A split has emerged among American Jewish organizations over the six-day commemoration of the Gaon in Lithuania, which is being organized by the Jewish community there.

The commemoration provides an opportunity for Lithuania's Jewish community "to claim some of the glory that was historical Vilna," said Rabbi Andrew Baker of the American Jewish Committee, a member of the honorary committee for the Sept. 9-15 event.

The Simon Wiesenthal Center, meanwhile, has called for a boycott of the event. It believes that participation would be seen as support for a Lithuanian government that has not yet atoned for the brutal destruction of its Jews.

Nearly 94 percent of the country's Jewish community perished in the Holocaust, a tragedy that local Jews say is not widely known in Lithuania.

Lithuanians have not "become aware of the extent of the Holocaust in this country," Israelis Lempertas, the co-coordinator of the Gaon commemoration, said in an interview in Vilnius, the Lithuanian name of Vilna.

"But you cannot make the entire people repent using such methods as the boycott."

The Jewish community has received more than \$100,000 from the Lithuanian government for the event, according to Simonas Alperavicius, the chairman of the Jewish community.

The commemoration has also received funding from UNESCO.

The Lithuanian government has assisted with promotional materials and has helped to clean up the only functioning Jewish cemetery in Vilnius, the site of the Gaon's grave.

It plans to issue six stamps featuring the Vilna Gaon and has commissioned a Lithuanian composer to write a commemorative composition to be performed by the country's national symphony.

The Parliament's first session after its summer recess will be dedicated to the legacy of the Gaon.

Lithuania builds monument to the Gaon

Parliament Chairman Vytautas Landsbergis told an Anti-Defamation League delegation visiting Lithuania in August that the Gaon commemoration will help promote mutual understanding between Lithuanians and Jews.

Indeed, the government has been so eager to help with the event that it caught the local Jewish community by surprise when it decided to build a sculpture of the Gaon on the Vilnius street that bears his name.

The community has not decided how to respond to this initiative, which contradicts the Jewish tradition of avoiding portrait images in art.

Still, the local Jewish community is enthusiastic about the upcoming events.

"We believe the commemoration will draw world attention to Vilnius and the Jewish community here, which before the war numbered nearly a quarter of a million and now consists of approximately 5,000 people," said Lempertas, co-coordinator of the commemoration.

Opponents of the commemoration, however, are not impressed by the government's efforts.

Such activities are attempts "by the Lithuanian government to gain publicity and earn points in the West," Efraim Zuroff, director of the Wiesenthal Center's Israel office, said in a telephone interview from Jerusalem.

In 1995, during a visit to Israel, Lithuanian President Algirdas Brazauskas publicly apologized for his country's involvement in the

Holocaust. Lithuania has established a national day of mourning for the victims of the Holocaust on Sept. 23 — the date of the Vilna Ghetto's liquidation in 1943.

But no legal action has been taken against five alleged war criminals who were stripped of their U.S. citizenship and deported to Lithuania in recent years.

Zuroff believes that the Lithuanian government is now trying to disguise Lithuania's wartime past by supporting the Gaon commemoration.

Lithuanian collaboration with the Nazis is "not pleasant to Lithuania," said Zuroff. "It is something they are trying to hide."

Some Lithuanian Jewish leaders believe that the proposed boycott could harm their community.

"We do not agree with the boycott. The memory of the Gaon has nothing to do with the Nazi collaborators," said the Jewish community's Alperavicius.

Lempertas said, "This campaign is making the life of the Jewish community here very difficult. It raises the wave of anti-Semitism."

After Zuroff's remarks were published in the Lithuanian press earlier this month, a synagogue in Kaunas, Lithuania's second largest city, received an anonymous letter accusing Jews of seeking to destroy Lithuania's well-being.

Abraham Foxman, national director of the ADL, said Jewish organizations and the Lithuanian government have many differences, "but these issues should be dealt with separately."

They should not be connected to Lithuania's desire "to recognize and celebrate its Jewish heritage," Foxman said in an interview in Vilnius.

While Lithuania now has a very small Jewish population, Vilnius was once a vital center of Jewish life and study.

The city's historical role is evidenced not only by its famous Talmud scholar but also by the recently discovered collection of Hebrew and Yiddish books, Torahs and Judaica languishing in a church in Vilnius.

Debate sparked over ownership of Torah scrolls

The 52,000 books — many written by the Gaon himself — and other items are now in the hands of the Lithuanian National Library, making the collection another source of conflict between the Jewish community and the Lithuanian government. Lithuania claims these items as part of its national heritage and considers the books valuable research materials. Jewish groups, however, assert that these materials belong to the Jewish community.

An international effort is under way to return the items to the Jewish community. Still being debated, however, is whether they belong to Jews in Lithuania or in the United States.

A coalition formed under the auspices of the National Foundation for Jewish Culture has agreed that the "materials ought to go to their rightful owners where ownership can be established," said Jerome Chanes, the foundation's program director.

Meanwhile, the Lithuanian Culture Ministry said that four of the six Torah scrolls held in the library will be returned to synagogues in Lithuania at the time of the Gaon commemoration.

The library also holds 365 fragments of Torah scrolls that are to be buried in accordance with Jewish law. The Lithuanian Jewish community has asked rabbinical authorities in Israel for advice on the burial procedure.

Although the coalition members are experiencing difficulties with the Lithuanian government, they have no plans to boycott the commemoration, Chanes said. □

(JTA correspondent Lev Krichevsky in Moscow contributed to this report.)

Albright traces family's roots on quiet visit to Czech Republic

By Randi Druzin

PRAGUE (JTA) — U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright has secretly returned to her roots.

Albright visited the Czech Republic this week for a private visit in which she toured at least one Jewish site and some of the towns her family inhabited.

Raised as a Roman Catholic — she later became an Episcopalian — Albright said she first learned she had Jewish ancestors when it was reported in The Washington Post last February.

On Sunday, Albright visited Terezin accompanied by her sister, her two daughters and their husbands.

Terezin, known in German as Theresienstadt, is an 18th-century fortress town that was used by the Nazis during World War II as a transit camp for Jews on their way to concentration camps further East. More than a dozen of her relatives died in the camps.

On Monday, Albright traveled to Letohrad, a small town in eastern Bohemia where her father's family once co-owned a factory that manufactured matches. There, she met with the town historian and with two people who knew her father, Josef Korbel, including one of his childhood friends.

In 1994, when Albright was U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Koloc prompted town officials to send Albright a letter informing her of her roots in Letohrad. Albright did not respond to that or other attempts by the town to communicate with her.

"This was her first visit to Letohrad," said Vladimir Tomek, deputy mayor of the town. "We were surprised by the brilliant Czech she spoke. I think she liked it here, and that she left happy."

Albright, whose family fled Czechoslovakia twice, once in 1938 to escape the Nazis, and then to the United States in 1948 after the Communist coup, also visited her mother's hometown of Kostelec.

Officials at the U.S. Embassy would not disclose any additional details of Albright's visit. □

Israeli court convicts members of right-wing group of sedition

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Two members of the right-wing organization Zo Artzeinu, or This Is Our Land, were convicted this week in connection with a series of anti-government protests they led during the summer and fall of 1995.

During that period, activists in the group blocked traffic along roads across the country in a series of protests against the policies of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

Moshe Feiglin and Shmuel Sackett were convicted Tuesday of sedition and distributing publications calling for sedition during those protests. But the Jerusalem Magistrates Court acquitted the two on seven separate charges of incitement. Sentencing will take place at a later date.

Commenting on the ruling, Sackett did not express regret for his actions; instead, he said he was surprised and disappointed by the verdict.

"It just goes to show you how Israel is not the democracy we all thought it was. Based on the decision, Martin Luther King, Jr., would have been guilty of sedition as well," he told Israel Radio. "We stood strong and tall. If, God forbid, people like Rabin or [Shimon] Peres take over, we'll do it again," he added.

The court dropped charges against another Zo Artzeinu activist, Benny Alon, after he was elected to the Knesset as a member of the nationalist Moledet Party. □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Questions over a conversion lead a U.S. Jew to Reform wedding

By Michele Chabin

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The latest recruit in the battle over Israeli recognition of converts hails from the most unlikely place — Louisiana.

An American man who underwent an Orthodox conversion in Metairie, La., was denied an official marriage in Israel last week on the grounds that his conversion may not have been legitimate.

But the rabbi who performed the conversion has uncovered the records.

The incident comes amid the struggle by the Reform and Conservative movements to obtain recognition for their conversions performed in Israel and the Orthodox establishment's push to strengthen its monopoly over religious life in the Jewish state.

Moreover, the case of Avraham Elhiany appears to lend credence to Reform and Conservative leaders' claims that the Orthodox Chief Rabbinate's control over Jewish life-cycle events affects all Jews, including those who do not wish to live in Israel.

When the Chief Rabbinate refused to provide an Orthodox rabbi to officiate at their wedding, Elhiany and Ilana Ohana turned to the Reform movement just two days prior to the ceremony.

The difficulties encountered by this couple "demonstrate that even when someone has undergone an Orthodox conversion outside Israel, there is no guarantee that they will be recognized as Jewish by the rabbinate," said Rabbi Michael Boydon, chairman of the Israel Council of Progressive Rabbis.

Boydon, who married the couple on Aug. 24, said he is convinced that Elhiany had a proper Orthodox conversion.

"I have seen all the documents of conversion and circumcision," said Boydon.

"The rabbinate has seen the same documents," he added.

The saga of Elhiany and his Israeli wife began about a month ago.

The child of a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother, Elhiany, 29, was raised as Jew and attended an Orthodox elementary school, although he was not officially converted until prior to his Bar Mitzvah.

The couple, who met in Louisiana — where the two plan to live — was married in a civil ceremony in the United States.

But they also scheduled a large Jewish wedding near Ohana's hometown of Ma'alot in northern Israel.

The wedding was hastily arranged, they said, because Ohana's 36-year-old brother is very ill.

Haifa's chief rabbi involved

Problems began in late July when Ohana, 31, flew to Israel to complete the wedding arrangements.

She approached the local religious council in Ma'alot, which informed her that it needed at least a month to process a marriage license and find a rabbi.

Then Haifa's chief rabbi became involved in the matter.

According to Haifa Chief Rabbi She'ar Yeshuv Cohen, the entire affair landed on his desk because Elhiany's documents "looked questionable to the rabbi in Ma'alot."

Cohen said that "the conversion certificate was handwritten, not a formal document, and it had no official stamps."

The conversion certificate was signed by Rabbi

Lester Miller, the former rabbi of Congregation Beth Israel, the Orthodox synagogue in Metairie, and two other rabbis.

To verify Miller's credentials, Cohen said he contacted the office of Sephardi Chief Rabbi Eliahu Bakshi-Doron in Jerusalem, who reported that "the rabbi is not recognized in Israel."

A phone call of endorsement from Rabbi Yossi Nemes, director of the Chabad center in Metairie, where Elhiany is affiliated, did not help, according to the couple.

Cohen said that when his office suggested to Ohana that she postpone the wedding so that her fiance could enroll in a conversion class, "she answered, 'I don't need you, I'll go to a Reform rabbi,' and slammed the door."

Skeptical of the couple's motivations, Cohen added, "When I asked Miss Ohana why she didn't simply have a Jewish wedding in the States, and not a civil wedding, she had no answer. Perhaps they were planning to have a Reform wedding all along."

Ohana vehemently rejected Cohen's assertions.

"The Haifa Rabbinate said they couldn't verify Avraham's Jewishness, even though I'd given them the conversion certificate," Ohana said in a telephone interview from her parents' home.

"This came as a total shock because Avraham was converted by three Orthodox rabbis."

Miller, reached in Brooklyn, N.Y., where he is now a rabbi, said he found the record of Elhiany's 1980 conversion in his files.

The rabbi said that since it was for a child, the Beit Din, or rabbinical court, conditioned the conversion on Elhiany's completion of his day school education, which went to the eighth grade.

Miller, who is listed in the official registry of the Rabbinical Council of America, an Orthodox organization, said he had faith in the Chief Rabbinate in Israel, but expressed surprise that it had not recognized his credentials.

"I've had quite a few conversions recognized in Israel," he said.

As for Elhiany's handwritten conversion document, Miller said that is the way it was done. "There are no Hebrew typewriters in Louisiana," he said.

For her part, Ohana believes the rabbinate is denying Elhiany's Jewishness because he does not lead an Orthodox lifestyle. When Avraham arrived in Israel several days before the wedding, the couple went to the rabbinate.

"When a rabbi asked him if he wears a yarmulke and keeps Shabbat he was honest and said, 'No,'" recalled Ohana.

'Judaism is the only thing I've ever known'

While Ohana said she regrets her angry threat to call the Reform movement, she added, "It was such an incredible insult to Avraham, who is so proud to be a Jew.

"How could they just reject the proof in front of them and ask Avraham to start all over again?" Ohana asked.

More than a week after his wedding, Elhiany remains upset over the rabbinate's denial of his Jewishness.

"From the moment the rabbinate refused to marry us, I've felt like everything was taken away from me," he said.

"I had my Bar Mitzvah at the kotel (Western Wall)," he said. "Judaism is the only thing I've ever known."

Angry at assertions that he and his wife forged their documents and lied to the rabbinate, Elhiany is demanding a public apology from the Haifa Rabbinate and is considering legal action against Cohen.

"If a Jew takes away the soul of another Jew," he says, "there is nothing left." □

NEWS ANALYSIS**Zionism centennial celebration explores current controversies***By Fredy Rom*

BASEL, Switzerland (JTA) — They came to celebrate 100 years of Zionism, but found themselves confronting present-day controversies.

The ceremonies here marking the centennial of the First Zionist Congress focused, as all expected, on what was achieved 100 years ago. But leading figures at the commemorations, which drew 1,500 attendees from around the world, also delved into such hot topics as Switzerland's role during World War II, the anti-Semitism that persists here to this day and Israel's commitment to the peace process with the Palestinians.

To be sure, the achievements of Zionism were celebrated at the formal dinner Sunday night — on the date and in the hall where Theodor Herzl concluded the first congress — when the five days of festivities drew to a close.

Avraham Burg, chairman of the Jewish Agency for Israel and the World Zionist Organization, which co-sponsored the event with the Basel government, applauded Herzl's vision. Dan Tichon, the speaker of the Knesset, likewise applauded the first congress, which transformed scattered 19th-century calls for a Jewish homeland into an international movement — Zionism — whose efforts were crowned 50 years later with the creation of the State of Israel.

But Tichon also discussed Israel's continued struggle against its Arab enemies, and in the process shifted the focus to the peace process.

"The Arab nations have made every effort to destroy the Zionist cause from the start," he said. "Only after five wars from which Israel emerged victorious, and after countless disasters brought by the Palestinians on themselves, dialogue commenced."

The peace process also became a theme of his Swiss counterpart, Judith Stamm.

"We see the success of Zionism, but we also see the dark side of this success," she said at the Sunday dinner, referring to Israeli policies toward the Palestinians, which she and other Swiss politicians sometimes question.

"We firmly support the state of Israel's right to existence. However, that does not mean that we must agree with every political measure taken by the state."

Tensions simmering in the background

If she appeared somewhat defensive, it was the result of Israeli-Swiss tensions that simmered in the background even as the festivities were being organized.

The Swiss have been reeling from the international outcry over revelations that they profited from their wartime dealings with the Nazis and failed to return bank deposits and other assets to their rightful owners after the war. Against this backdrop, the country had hoped to use the centennial as an international showcase of goodwill toward Jews — and had hoped to draw a few thousand Jewish leaders to the event.

But the ambivalence of some Jews in the face of Switzerland's wartime history led to a smaller turnout.

Indeed, Israeli President Ezer Weizman canceled his plans to attend the conference, leaving Tichon as the highest-ranking Israeli politician.

Weizman's aides originally cited conflicts in his schedule, but this week Burg admitted that Weizman canceled in part because of less than savory facts that have emerged regarding Switzerland's wartime behavior.

Weizman also believed that the celebrations of the first congress should only be held in Israel, Burg added.

In fact, another commemoration will take place in Jerusalem in December, when the 33rd World Zionist Congress will be held.

But for all the hopes of Swiss officials, the Basel event did not result in an Israeli-Swiss rapprochement.

In an interview this week on Swiss Television, Tichon admitted that Israeli-Swiss relations were strained. "I do not know if Israel or Switzerland is responsible for this strain," he said, "but we must improve our relations."

Along with Switzerland's wartime actions, the current attitudes of some Swiss toward Jews have created additional tension.

The often heated public debate regarding Switzerland's responsibility for its wartime role has led in recent months to an anti-Semitic backlash, with some incidents involving the leaders of Switzerland's Jewish community.

Last week, the Israeli ambassador to Switzerland, Gabriel Padon, said in an interview that he had called on the Swiss government to do more to counter Swiss anti-Semitism.

Indeed, Swiss Interior Minister Ruth Dreifuss, herself Jewish, told attendees at a Saturday night dinner in Tichon's honor that Swiss anti-Semitism still exists.

Fearing that anti-Semitic attitudes among some Swiss would lead to violence at the centennial commemoration, the Swiss government put extraordinary security measures in place for the event. Nearly 2,000 Swiss police and soldiers were deployed to protect delegates. Helicopters buzzed through Basel's air space, which was declared off-limits to civilian planes, and Swiss patrol boats provided security on the Rhine River.

Only one incident was reported: A small pipe bomb exploded early Sunday morning a half mile from the congress center, but a spokesman for the Prosecutor's Office said there were no indications that the bomb was targeted at the festivities. □

(JTA foreign editor Mitchell Danow contributed to this report.)

'Climate of hate' in Israel blamed for arson attack on Reform school

NEW YORK (JTA) — The head of the Reform movement in the United States is charging that remarks by Orthodox officials in Israel created the climate for this week's attack on a Reform school in Jerusalem.

Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Reform movement's Union of American Hebrew Congregations, charged that remarks by Orthodox officials "have contributed to a climate of hate that makes such attacks possible."

A firebomb was thrown Sunday night through the window of a kindergarten operated by the Reform movement in Mevasseret Zion, a suburb of Jerusalem.

Police said they have not yet found any suspects.

The private school, located in a rented apartment, was almost completely destroyed. It serves about 40 children between the ages of 3 and 5, and had been scheduled to open its doors Monday, the first day of Israel's new school year.

In his reaction, Yoffie specifically referred to comments by Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Yisrael Lau who, Yoffie said, compared Reform Jews to Arab suicide bombers. Lau was quoted in an Orthodox newspaper saying that the high rate of assimilation among American Jews, particularly the Reform, was its own form of suicide.

Meanwhile, Education Minister Zevulun Hammer, of the National Religious Party, said he would consider making funds available to the kindergarten.

Hammer, who also serves as religious affairs minister, said that regardless of affiliation, no educational institution should be the target of an attack. □