



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ **The board of directors of the United Israel Appeal voted to review its relationship with the Jewish Agency for Israel.** Officials of the UIA, which channels money raised by the United Jewish Appeal to the Jewish Agency, said the move was a response to the concerns of federations and donors. UIA said the review comes as the agency is undergoing a restructuring and strategic-planning process.

■ **President Clinton announced the nomination of Edward "Ned" Walker Jr. to become the next ambassador to Israel.** Walker, currently U.S. ambassador to Egypt, has previously served in several U.S. embassies in the Middle East, including Israel. If confirmed by the Senate, he would replace Martin Indyk.

■ **The Senate Foreign Relations Committee postponed for two weeks a vote on Martin Indyk's nomination to become assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs.** Senators requested the delay to review written responses to questions posed to the nominee. Congressional sources said Indyk is likely to be confirmed.

■ **AT&T apologized to anyone offended by an internal memo on how to approach various ethnic clients, according to news reports.** The memo advised its salespeople how to deal with six ethnic groups, including Jews.

■ **Israeli and American officials said Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat should be held responsible for the terrorist infrastructure operating in the territories.** Their comments came in the wake of Israel's disclosure of the identities of four of the five terrorists believed to have carried out two recent suicide bombings in Jerusalem. An aide to Arafat said Israel should be blamed because the identified bombers came from a West Bank area under Israeli control.

■ **Russia's upper house of Parliament unanimously approved a controversial bill restricting freedom of religion.** Judaism is one of four "official religions" in the bill, but some Jewish groups are worried about its impact on religious minorities. The bill now goes to Russian President Boris Yeltsin.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Needy Holocaust survivors view Swiss payments as meager, late

By Michael J. Jordan

BUDAPEST (JTA) — In a matter of weeks, needy Holocaust survivors in Eastern and Central Europe will begin to feel the first tangible results of Switzerland's attempt to make amends for its wartime past.

But among those who have been designated to receive payment from Switzerland's Holocaust Memorial Fund, the news that they will soon be receiving a check has been greeted with deep skepticism, bitterness and growing impatience.

"Nothing can compensate us for what we've suffered," says Jozsef Banyai, an 83-year-old who subsists on a \$100 monthly pension after losing his parents and two sisters in Auschwitz and spending four years of forced labor in Ukraine.

"But if there's some money, then just give it instead of talking about it."

For the oldest and neediest among the designated recipients, the payout — approximately \$1,000 — may already be too late.

In Budapest, with an estimated 20,000 to 25,000 survivors, four to five per day are said to be dying.

After managing to survive the Holocaust, elderly Jews now suffer the indignity of another struggle for survival, this time economically. Their paltry pensions barely keep pace with inflation, but they nonetheless cling to their pride.

"It's humiliating that our lives have become so devalued," says Maria Hirschler, 77, whose home in suburban Budapest was looted and bombed during the war.

"Now I'm a beggar — financially, but not in my heart."

Hirschler, a former factory comptroller, lives with her daughter in a cramped, rundown apartment in an increasingly dangerous neighborhood. A mugger broke her arm a few years ago while stealing her purse.

Nowadays, she resorts to saving leftovers from her free Monday-through-Saturday lunches she receives from communal sources so she has enough to eat on Sundays.

If compensation had been made sooner, she says, "some of us could have began in a better position."

Just the same, she welcomes the gesture from Switzerland — as long as she is not seen as having sought it.

'I want to live in more humane conditions'

"Even if it's for one, two or five more years, I want to live in more humane conditions. I'm not going to go ask for it, but I'll accept what I'm due."

Last week, Jewish officials in New York and Budapest turned over to Swiss authorities the names of some 32,000 Holocaust survivors eligible for the first round of payments from the Swiss fund. Additional names are expected to be presented to the Swiss in the coming weeks.

The handover of the long-awaited lists, drawn up by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee from names supplied by field workers in Eastern and Central Europe, caps months of deliberations and disagreements between Jewish and Swiss officials — and among various Jewish organizations — about how to distribute the fund.

The move marks the first substantive step toward distributing checks to the first group of recipients — the so-called double victims who suffered under both Nazism and communism and never received reparations from the German government.

Some 12,000 Jews living in former Soviet bloc countries were originally slated to receive payments in the coming weeks. But that number could grow to 40,000-55,000 elderly survivors in 15 former Soviet bloc countries.

Rolf Bloch, the president of the Swiss Jewish community who also chairs the executive board of the fund, recently said it was a mere "technicality" to release funds to the larger group of survivors.

Switzerland's three largest banks created the Holocaust Memorial

Fund earlier this year amid allegations that they were hoarding the wealth of Holocaust victims.

The fund now stands at about \$116 million. Additional pledges already made by private Swiss companies and the Swiss National Bank would bring the total to some \$200 million.

After the first payments are made to survivors in Eastern and Central Europe, the remainder of the fund will be distributed to other survivors — including additional double victims — on the basis of need and age.

For Banyai, money from the Swiss fund may help him avoid a third heart attack.

With it he would fly to Israel to undergo heart surgery and be near his only child, Laszlo, and three young grandchildren in Jerusalem.

"I want to live a little more, for my son," says the widower of 13 years.

Banyai would not stay in Israel, he says, for fear he would be a burden on his son.

He also says he would not want to relinquish his meager pension, a bulk of which pays for medicine, heating and electricity.

"I worked hard for it," says the retired courier for the Hungarian state railway.

A man who identifies himself only by his first name, Sandor, talks as if compensation would be more trouble than it is worth.

Peering through his coke-bottle glasses, the 89-year-old insists on partial anonymity "because there is no order nowadays. People are jealous if a Jew has five more grams of bread than someone else."

Sandor says he cannot help but question the sincerity of the Swiss.

"The old Jews don't believe in anything because we've experienced so much bad in our lives," Sandor says. "The Swiss are probably going to postpone payment until there are none of us left."

Even if the payment arrives, he says he won't know what to do with it.

"Would you make a plan if you were 89 years old?" Sandor asks with a laugh.

"I can't eat \$1,000 worth of food. And I certainly didn't suffer so much to go and make some restaurant owner rich."

Czech survivors share the skepticism of their Hungarian counterparts regarding the Swiss payment.

Like the other double victims, they suffered under six years of Nazism and more than four decades of communism — and they are wary of grand gestures.

Reflecting the mood of many of the designated recipients, many Czech survivors feel that the payment is too little, too late.

'Money won't help them rebuild their lives'

"Many survivors are dying," says Hanus Schimmerling, 76. "This money won't help them rebuild their lives.

"It's too late. They are too old."

Schimmerling, who is the chairman of Terezin Initiative, an association of Czech Holocaust survivors, says, "I want the Holocaust to be remembered, but not to be associated with money."

Adds his wife, Vera, "The youngest of us is about 70 years old, and people are dying too quickly. Besides, there is no compensation for the Holocaust.

"I lost my whole family in the war, including my little sister.

And nobody is going to bring these loved ones back to me."

Oldrich Stransky, 76, whose name appeared on the list along with the Schimmerlings, is also uncomfortable

with the idea of anyone attempting to provide compensation for the sufferings of the Holocaust.

"I view it more as a humanitarian gesture than as compensation," he says.

Stransky spent four years in concentration camps during World War II. The Nazis took his family home, and it was later confiscated by the Czech Communist regime.

He now lives in a modest three-bedroom home in Prague.

"The money wouldn't change my life very much," he says.

"It would not be enough to make a difference."

He adds: "It's too bad that we didn't get the financial help immediately after the war, when we had no clothes, no place to live and we had to rebuild our lives from scratch." □

(JTA correspondents Randi Druzin in Prague and Daniel Kurtzman in Washington contributed to this report.)

U.S. Senate moves to assure residency for religious workers

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The U.S. Senate has voted to amend U.S. immigration law to grant permanent residency status for foreign workers who come to this country for religious activities.

If passed by the House of Representatives and signed into law, the Religious Workers Act would assure that yeshiva teachers, mohels, cantors, ritual slaughterers and other religious functionaries can continue to live and work in the United States on a permanent basis.

Religious groups, including Agudath Israel of America, which represents the fervently Orthodox, had urged lawmakers at a hearing of the Senate judiciary immigration subcommittee to extend a law, set to expire at the end of the month, that grants permanent U.S. residency status to religious workers from abroad.

Under the Immigration Act of 1990, 10,000 visas can be set aside each year for "special immigrants," with up to 5,000 of them available to religious ministers.

At issue here are the remaining 5,000 visas that can be awarded to foreign religious workers seeking to come to the United States.

The law has permitted religious instructors, counselors, missionaries and others to live and work in the United States under the sponsorship of a religious organization or institution that seeks to employ them to provide religious services to its community.

Jewish day schools catering to Russian immigrants, for example, often recruit Russian teachers and other religious functionaries who understand Russian culture and family life, according to Agudah officials.

David Grunblatt, an immigration law expert with Agudath Israel, urged the Senate panel to make it easier for religious workers to remain here.

"We must not shut the doors, certainly to those who helped to enrich us so much spiritually and culturally," he said.

Sen. Spencer Abraham (R-Mich.) sponsored the legislation as a tribute to Mother Teresa, who wrote to him weeks before her death urging Congress to extend the law. He said he hoped the legislation "will be remembered as part of her extraordinary legacy."

"Religious workers play an important role in our nation's charities, and I am pleased that with Senate passage of this legislation, these individuals are one step closer to being able to continue their philanthropic efforts on a permanent basis," Abraham said.

The bill has yet to be taken up by the House, where its fate remains uncertain. □

Orthodox groups voice united stance against religious pluralism

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK (JTA) — In their strongest and most unified public stance to date about religious pluralism and Jewish unity, four major American Orthodox organizations have issued a joint High Holidays statement condemning those who have challenged Israel's religious status quo.

In the statement titled "A heartfelt message to our fellow Jews," the four groups — Agudath Israel of America, the National Council of Young Israel, the Rabbinical Council of America and the Orthodox Union — confirm their commitment to a single halachic standard in Israel and implore all Jews "to shun unworthy political posturing, as well as political, economic and social pressure."

Leaders of the same four Orthodox groups met in a closed session with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in New York in the spring, urging him to maintain Orthodox control over these matters in Israel.

But this is the first time in memory that they have issued this type of joint public statement.

Referring obliquely to lawsuits brought by Reform and Conservative Jews who want to have their non-Orthodox conversions and marriages legally recognized by Israel — as well as to pressure placed on Israeli government officials by religiously liberal American Jewish leaders — the statement blames those who have attacked the Orthodox-controlled religious establishment for having "created a climate of ill-will and anger."

"All Jews, regardless of level of religious observance or affiliation, should recognize that there must be uniformly acceptable Jewish standards for religious marriage, divorce and conversion if the integrity of our peoplehood is to be preserved," the statement says.

Referring directly to Israel's local religious councils in which Reform and Conservative Jews have sought the legal right to participate, the statement calls it "only reasonable" that all members of municipal religious councils in Israel "subscribe to the religious precepts that they are charged to oversee."

The statement also says that it is "a matter of historical fact" that the Western Wall "has been a sacred place of traditional Jewish prayer and peace and tranquility for Jews since time immemorial."

On Shavuot, and again more recently on Tisha B'Av, Conservative and Reform men and women attempting to pray together at the Wall were chased away from the site — the first time by a mob of angry haredi, or devoutly Orthodox Jews, and in August by Jerusalem police, who insisted that they could not be protected.

Leaders of the Reform and Conservative movements here criticized the statement.

Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Reform movement's Union of American Hebrew Congregations, said it "is out of touch with the realities both in Israel and here."

Calling Israel "a spiritual wasteland," Yoffie said, "It's not about preserving the integrity of Jewish peoplehood, but about preserving control of the Orthodox monopoly over religious life in Israel." □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Jewish issues take back seat in Polish Parliament elections

By Ruth E. Gruber

WARSAW (JTA) — The Jewish story in this week's Polish elections is that there is no story.

In contrast to previous votes, anti-Semitism played little role in Poland's parliamentary elections and the new

government is not expected to shift official policy on Jewish issues.

Some observers, however, fear a change of attitude if the expected center-right coalition based around a Solidarity alliance comes to power.

"The president and other leaders know that [Jewish relations] are a priority," said one civil servant involved in Jewish issues. "One cannot expect changes, but it will be perhaps a matter of zeal in carrying out policy."

Preliminary results in Sunday's elections gave the rightist Solidarity Election Action 34 percent of the vote, compared to nearly 27 percent for the Democratic Left Alliance of reformed communists, which leads the current government.

The liberal, centrist Freedom Union came in third with nearly 14 percent and will be a key element in a new governing coalition. The coalition's composition was not expected to be known for several weeks.

Solidarity is an umbrella group of more than 30 small parties linked with the Roman Catholic Church and traditionalist, at times nationalist, values.

Several prominent leaders or supporters of the Freedom Union are of Jewish origin, and its liberal, secular positions would in part balance some of Solidarity's positions.

The Movement for the Reconstruction of Poland, the one party whose candidates openly expressed anti-Semitism, was expected to get little more than 5 percent of the vote and only a handful of seats in Parliament. It is unlikely to figure in a new government.

The outgoing government, led by the former communists, has made a priority of attempting to improve relations between Poles and Jews.

Last year, for example, the government formally apologized for the 1946 Kielce pogrom in which a Polish mob killed 42 Jewish Holocaust survivors. A special Polish ambassador to the Diaspora was appointed two years ago.

'Jewish issue was largely absent'

President Aleksander Kwasniewski, a former communist who defeated Solidarity founder Lech Walesa to become president in 1995 and who remains in office for another two years, was even accused by some on the right of being too accommodating on Jewish issues.

"The Jewish issue was largely absent" in the parliamentary election campaign, said Konstanty Gebert, editor of the Warsaw-based Jewish monthly Midrasz. "It's as if the Jewish issue had outlived its usefulness."

More importantly, Gebert said, political issues involving Jewish concerns were not raised in the campaign — including property restitution and the controversy over Poland's intention to buy some \$700 million worth of helicopter missiles and avionics from Israel.

The United States has sharply criticized Poland for choosing Israeli arms rather than American ones just two months after Poland was invited to join NATO.

Israel this week said it was confident Poland would go ahead with the deal, though it might be split between Israeli and American companies.

The Polish government had said that a final decision on the arms deal would not be made until after the parliamentary elections.

While Jewish observers reported little anti-Semitism in the election campaign, Pawel Spiewak, a sociologist who is active in the Jewish community, said he was concerned that in the wake of Sunday's election opposition to anti-Semitism would be linked with communism.

"Since the post-communists (in the current government) are the main critics of anti-Semitism, this could lead to the view that if you are against anti-Semitism, you are communist," he said. □

High Court backs broadcast of television program on gays*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel's High Court of Justice has approved the broadcast of a television program about homosexual teens.

The court ruled this week on a petition filed by gay and civil rights organizations after Education Minister Zevulun Hammer tried to block the broadcast of "An Open Hand" on Educational Television.

Hammer, who heads the National Religious Party, maintained that Educational Television should have simultaneously offered other programming that would promote what he termed "family values," as well as present the model of a "heterosexual, traditional Jewish family."

"I think the court would have acted more suitably had it accepted my proposal to present a new program which would present the matter in a more balanced fashion," Hammer said.

Knesset member Hanan Porat of the NRP said he regretted the decision and was concerned the program would encourage homosexuality among youth.

Meanwhile, Labor Knesset member Yael Dayan, who heads a parliamentary subcommittee on homosexual rights, welcomed the court ruling as a step toward recognition of gay rights.

The justices, including court president Aharon Barak, said that such a program within the framework of Educational Television could contribute to nurturing more tolerance in Israeli society. □

Labor Party head shifts view on national unity government*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli Labor Party leader Ehud Barak said this week that he would consider joining a national unity government, but only if Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu changed his policies.

A national unity government could provide a much-needed consensus from across the political spectrum to restart the negotiations with the Palestinians that have been suspended since March.

Speaking after a meeting Sunday with Public Security Minister Avigdor Kahalani, who initiated the idea, Barak said that he would only consider joining a national unity government if the current government made a "180-degree turn" from its present policies regarding the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

There will be something to discuss "when the prime minister reaches the conclusion that his policy of the last 16 months is leading Israel on the slope to an unnecessary war," said Barak.

His comments marked a slight shift from his previous opposition to a unity government.

Since replacing former Prime Minister Shimon Peres at the leadership of the Labor Party in June, the former army chief of staff had dismissed the idea, calling the policies of Netanyahu's governing coalition a "failure."

Several months ago, Netanyahu raised the idea of a national unity government as part of a call for accelerated final-status talks with the Palestinians.

But he was far cooler to the idea Sunday, when he told reporters accompanying him on a trip to Austria that he would consider a unity government.

But he would do so, Netanyahu said, only when Labor shows a willingness to put "national interest first and foremost." □

Alleged crime boss to remain jailed*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel's Supreme Court has ordered that an alleged member of a Russian organized crime ring remain in jail until the end of his trial.

The high court's decision this week overturned a lower court ruling allowing Gregory Lerner to be placed under house arrest. The court made its decision because it believes that Lerner might try to flee the country.

Lerner, who has been in custody since his arrest in May, faces charges of attempting to bribe senior Israeli political figures, including former Prime Minister Shimon Peres.

He also has been charged with defrauding banks and corporations in Israel, Russia and Europe of some \$100 million.

Lerner, who is also known as Zvi Ben-Ari and who immigrated to Israel in 1989, was also investigated on suspicion of being involved in two murders committed in Russia.

Israeli prosecutors did not file any charges in connection with the murders. □

Israeli university honors Mandela*By Suzanne Belling*

CAPE TOWN (JTA) — South African President Nelson Mandela was awarded an honorary doctorate from Ben-Gurion University this week.

But the ceremony was held here rather than in Israel because Mandela has indicated he will not visit the Middle East until he is able to make a meaningful contribution to the peace process.

Nonetheless, the event drew dignitaries from around the world, including Knesset speaker Dan Tichon.

Avishay Braverman, president of Ben-Gurion University, which is located in the Negev Desert, said at the ceremony that Mandela is "a master in bringing people together."

Braverman added that he hoped the spirit of Mandela would "prevail upon all the leaders of the Middle East" in their quest for peace.

Mandela said the honorary doctorate in philosophy was "a triumph of the whole South African nation," who transformed conflict into "a society where all can work together to make the people of the rainbow nation blossom."

While South Africans do not believe they can solve others' conflicts, Mandela said that "we do believe that our own humble experience has shown that negotiated solutions can be found even to conflicts that have come to seem intractable." □

Kibbutz markets giant bumblebees*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — When Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu traveled to Asia last month to promote trade, he probably did not realize that one of the keys might lie in genetically mutated bumblebees.

But it appears to be true.

Kibbutz Yad Mordechai has already signed what it estimated to be a \$1 million deal to export the enormous bumblebees — which are 15 times normal size — to South Korea and Japan.

Surprisingly, the super bee, produced at the kibbutz, which is south of Ashkelon, will not be used for honey.

Instead, the mutant bee will be used for pollinating crops. □