



## NEWS AT A GLANCE

### NEWS ANALYSIS

#### Issue of adoptees' conversions shows compromise is attainable

By David Landau

JERUSALEM (JTA) — As Israel and American Jewry seek a way out of the religious pluralism crisis, one ray of light has appeared.

A little-known Israeli committee set up to deal with the specific problem of conversions of adopted children was reported to be nearing agreement.

The reported progress comes against the backdrop of disagreement between the Orthodox and non-Orthodox streams over granting official recognition to non-Orthodox conversions performed in Israel and allowing non-Orthodox officials to participate in local religious councils.

The committee's progress is important because it demonstrates that public figures from both sides of the religious divide in Israel are capable of reaching pragmatic solutions.

According to the Israeli daily Ha'aretz, the three-member committee will recommend that adopted children be required to adhere to the basic tenets of Orthodoxy, but that their adoptive parents, who have also had to follow these tenets, will no longer face such a requirement.

The committee includes two Orthodox rabbis — Haim Drukman and Eli Ben-Dahan — and attorney Ofra Friedman.

Drukman is a leading force in the National Religious Party and is head of a conversion Beit Din, as religious courts are known, in southern Israel.

Ben-Dahan is national director of the religious courts, and Friedman is chairwoman of Na'amat, a women's organization affiliated with the Histadrut labor federation.

The Drukman Committee was established by the government alongside the better-known Ne'eman Committee, headed by Minister of Finance Ya'acov Ne'eman, which is seeking a compromise — so far without success — to avert further action on controversial conversion legislation that would codify Orthodox control over conversions performed in Israel.

The Ne'eman Committee, which is made up of rabbis and laymen from the three leading streams of Judaism, had reportedly been considering a proposal that would grant Reform and Conservative rabbis a role in conversions and marriages.

But Israel's chief rabbis last week rejected the reported proposal.

If the Ne'eman Committee fails to hammer out a compromise, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has pledged to back the Orthodox parties in his coalition that have vowed to pass legislation regarding conversions and religious councils.

At the same time, representatives of the liberal movements have threatened to abandon an agreed-upon freeze and pursue their complaints with the High Court of Justice.

#### A glimmer of hope

Ne'eman and Netanyahu were hard at work this week urging all sides to delay action for several months in order to give the Ne'eman panel more time to find a workable situation.

In contrast to these developments, the reported compromise on the conversions of adopted children offered some hope.

The Jewish status of such children, particularly of babies adopted in Brazil and elsewhere by childless Israeli couples, has deeply moved the Israeli public in recent years.

Adoptive parents have complained bitterly that the Chief Rabbinate required them, in effect, to undertake a wholesale change of their own lifestyles before the religious courts would consent to convert the adopted children to Judaism.

Nearly a dozen of these parents eventually sought help from Conservative rabbis in Israel, who converted the children in 1995 at a ceremony at Hannaton, a Conservative kibbutz in the Western Galilee.

Many of the parents then filed applications with the High Court of Justice to order the government to recognize the Jewishness of their children.

Subsequently, however, most of these adoptive parents sought to

■ A dozen Jewish philanthropists have joined together to create an \$18 million fund to help start about 25 new Jewish day schools during the next five years. Founded by Michael Steinhardt, the new consortium, the Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education, also includes Charles and Edgar Bronfman, Morton Mandel and Leslie Wexner.

■ The American teen-ager who fled to Israel after allegedly committing a murder near Washington vowed to fight his extradition. Israel's attorney general cleared the way for extradition with his ruling that Sheinbein is not an Israeli citizen. The legal battle could take up to two years, according to a Maryland prosecutor.

■ Israel is reportedly ready to limit settlement construction to projects already under way. The reports came as U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross met separately with Israeli Defense Minister Yitzchak Mordechai and the Palestinian Authority's second-in-command, Mahmoud Abbas, in Jerusalem.

■ Several demonstrations calling for an immediate Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon took place over the weekend. Calls for a withdrawal have increased after the deaths of 12 Israeli elite soldiers in a commando raid last month.

■ The spiritual leader of the Shas Party told thousands of people at a rally in Jerusalem that the non-Orthodox movements must return to Orthodox Judaism to be accepted in Israel. Rabbi Ovadia Yosef's comments came amid meetings aimed at calming the explosive issues surrounding religious pluralism.

■ Former Vichy France official Maurice Papon denied in court that he signed arrest or deportation orders during World War II. Papon, 87, is on trial for allegedly deporting 1,560 Jews while he was secretary-general of the Bordeaux region during the war.

■ A groundbreaking ceremony took place for a new visitors' center at the Yad Vashem Museum in Jerusalem. Construction of the center will reportedly cost \$65 million.

have their children reconverted under the auspices of the official Orthodox rabbinate.

For its part, the Orthodox establishment has adopted its most moderate stance in the cases of these children — whether because of the direct challenge posed by the Conservative conversions or because, as some Orthodox rabbis explain, Orthodox law affords greater flexibility in the case of babies.

Na'amat also showed flexibility.

While working together with the non-Orthodox movements to challenge Orthodox conversion requirements in court, Na'amat maintained close ties with key Orthodox rabbis, constantly urging them to find an acceptable solution. A top Na'amat legal aide explained that the movement places the interests of the children and the families above all else.

This pragmatic approach is not dissimilar to that of Industry and Trade Minister Natan Sharansky's Yisrael Ba'Aliyah Party, another key player in the conversion game.

Far from siding with the non-Orthodox movements — a move that has drawn the ire of these movements — the Russian immigrant party has sought during the past year to nudge the Chief Rabbinate to moderate its position when it comes to the legal status of thousands of non-Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union.

It is chiefly thanks to Yisrael Ba'Aliyah's pressure — and to the clout it wields in the governing coalition — that the finance and religious affairs ministries, together with the Chief Rabbinate, have agreed to set up a network of special religious courts where conversion candidates — mostly from the former Soviet Union — are prepared for conversion.

This system is still very far from being an efficient operation. It is dogged by budgetary constraints and by infighting between various government agencies and voluntary groups.

Nevertheless, the system represented a step forward.

### **Serving constituents' best interests**

As with Na'amat's efforts on behalf of adopted babies, the position of the Yisrael Ba'Aliyah politicians is that it is better to work out a deal with the Orthodox establishment, if such a deal is attainable, than to subject their constituencies to the anguish of serving as legal and political guinea pigs.

The failure of American Jewish activists to empathize with, or even to understand, this approach on the part of non-Orthodox — and often secularist — Israeli groups is part of the general breakdown in communication and understanding that the conversion controversy is exposing in the fraying relationship between Israel and U.S. Jewry.

As a democracy, Israel works by votes, by interest groups, by trade-offs, by all the machinery of the parliamentary system in which elected representatives must seek to serve their constituents' best interests.

As a result, most secular Israeli politicians do not see it in their interest to fight for the right of non-Orthodox rabbis to perform conversions or marriages.

Apart from the leftist Meretz Party, Israel's mainstream political parties consistently refuse to place the issue of religious pluralism on their platforms or on the national agenda.

With the Orthodox sectors of the Jewish population in Israel growing quickly, political leaders of all stripes, playing by the rules of parliamentary democracy, are thinking first of their constituents' interests.

They are seeking to obtain a solution for their problems within the existing, monopolistic, non-pluralistic system — if that is at all possible. □

### **American Jewish groups knock Malaysian premier's comments**

*By Peter Ephross*

NEW YORK (JTA) — American Jewish groups have reacted angrily to anti-Semitic remarks recently made by Malaysia's prime minister.

The World Jewish Congress said last Friday it would complain to the U.N. Human Rights Commission about the remarks of Mahathir Mohammad, who blamed Jews for his country's financial troubles.

The Anti-Defamation League, the Simon Wiesenthal Center and the American Jewish Committee all released statements criticizing Mahathir.

"The Prime Minister's slanders are from a detailed script — a history of racist invective that has hounded and brought destruction to Jews for centuries," said a letter the AJCommittee sent to Malaysia's ambassador to the United States.

While speaking Oct. 10 before a crowd estimated at 10,000 in a Muslim village, Mahathir said he suspected Jewish groups had an "agenda" to block the progress of Muslims.

Mahathir added that the recent decline of Malaysia's currency, the ringgit, could be the work of Jews.

As he had on previous occasions, Mahathir singled out George Soros, a wealthy Jewish investor and philanthropist, for deliberately trying to hurt the Malaysian economy by indulging in currency speculation.

Mahathir again drew criticism when he denied the comments the following day.

"I only made a statement, but the press went on to say that I was accusing the Jews. We cannot make such wild accusations," he said. "They will twist our arms."

Meanwhile, opposition politicians in Malaysia have criticized the prime minister's remarks, as have newspapers in Australia and in the Pacific Rim. "The Malaysian prime minister is a dangerously irresponsible racist and a major threat to the stability of the southeast Asian region," the Sydney Morning Herald newspaper said in an editorial.

Observers believe that by attacking Jews, Mahathir is trying to shift the blame for the recent slide in the ringgit. Approximately 20 million people live in Malaysia. More than half of them are Muslims.

Malaysia and Israel do not have diplomatic ties, and Israeli citizens are not allowed to visit Malaysia. □

*(JTA correspondents Tom Tugend in Los Angeles and Jeremy Jones in Sydney contributed to this report.)*

### **IDF withdraws Merkava tank from Lebanon after soldier dies**

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel Defense Force officials are reviewing the capabilities of the Merkava tank, which has shown itself to be more vulnerable in combat than army officials previously believed.

While the review continues, the IDF is withdrawing the tank from southern Lebanon, the Israeli daily Ma'ariv reported.

An Israeli soldier, Sgt. Ronen Hayun, 19, was killed over the weekend when his Merkava tank was hit by Hezbollah missiles. It was the second time that an Israeli soldier was killed inside such a tank in recent weeks.

The Merkava is considered a first-rate tank, with a highly sophisticated technology designed to protect its crew.

As part of their review of the tank's possible vulnerable points, IDF officials, headed by reserve Gen. Yisrael Tal, the developer of the tank, will attempt to determine the type of missile that struck the tank over the weekend. □

## Chicago Jewish nursing home wins settlement for attacks by officials

By Pauline Dubkin Yearwood

Chicago Jewish News

CHICAGO (JTA) — Six Illinois Department of Public Health employees have been ordered to pay a Chicago nursing home owner \$250,000 for making anti-Semitic remarks and submitting false findings during a routine licensing and certification review.

In what is believed to be the first ruling of its kind in the United States, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 7th Circuit, reversing a lower court's decision, ruled that the actions and behavior of the six employees constituted "a malicious broadside" against the Jewish-owned Sherwin Manor Nursing Center that almost cost the facility its license.

The case grew out of a 1991 licensure and certification survey.

According to court documents, during the two-week survey the six surveyors made numerous, blatant anti-Semitic remarks, then fabricated a host of violations against the facility.

Sherwin Manor is owned and operated by members of the Osina family, who are Orthodox Jews.

Some 80 percent of the residents are Jewish and the facility has a kosher kitchen and serves only kosher meals.

The 18-year-old facility has always gotten high marks in the survey, according to court documents, and receives Quality Incentive Program funds that the Illinois Department of Public Aid awards to facilities that provide a superior level of care to Medicaid patients.

Sherwin Manor employees stated in affidavits that they overheard the surveyors say, referring to the owners, "They are Jews, you can't trust them." Other remarks included: "She's a Jew and a liar — you can't trust her"; "They (the administrators) are terrible, vicious, rotten people"; "These Jews, they hire Pollacks [sic] who can't read or speak English."

### Unavailability of pork prompted a violation

The surveyors also told residents that they were entitled to be served pork at meals and "encouraged residents to complain about the unavailability of pork," according to the documents.

At the end of the certification period, the surveyors compiled a 124-page report listing 28 federal violations and more than 40 state violations.

One violation was for not providing residents with a varied diet because only beef, chicken and fish — but not pork — were served as main dishes.

The report also charged that the nursing home lacked no-smoking signs; that its records were unavailable; that it lacked a quality assurance program; that residents were not given a program of activities; and that the facility was "thick with soil" and smelled of urine.

Howard Hoffman of the Chicago law firm of Holleb and Coff, the Osina family's attorney, said the family called him as soon as the detrimental report was filed and immediately began gathering evidence to rebut the findings.

The evidence included, among other items, photographs of the facility's no-smoking signs and of residents participating in activities that the surveyors claimed did not exist.

Hoffman said that within days of the filing, which automatically triggered federal decertification proceedings, he met with state officials armed with "tomes" of materials refuting the charges.

State officials, after reviewing the material, deleted

most of the survey team's findings, unconditionally renewed Sherwin Manor's state license and recommended to federal authorities that decertification proceedings be stopped.

Osina then sued the six surveyors for depriving Sherwin Manor of its rights to due process and to equal protection, and sought actual and punitive damages.

The district court dismissed the suit, ruling that the surveyors' conduct was not an offense of "constitutional magnitude" since the facility did not suffer any actual injury from their actions.

Sherwin's owners appealed, and in October 1994, the 7th U.S. Court of Appeals reversed the lower court decision.

It ruled that Sherwin Manor's equal protection rights had been violated by the surveyors' "verbal abuse accompanied by the imposition of a special administrative burden."

After nearly three years of settlement talks, the case came to an end Sept. 17, when the U.S. District Court ordered the six surveyors to pay \$250,000 to Sherwin Manor.

Hoffman said the money will actually be paid by the state of Illinois, since it acts as the surveyors' insurer.

The surveyors were not fired or disciplined, Hoffman said.

The family said its decision to sue was not motivated by money because they spent more than the amount they were awarded in attorneys' fees and other costs related to the case. □

## Latvia reverses stance with new probe of suspected Nazi

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — Latvian officials are not ready to end their investigation of a suspected Nazi war criminal living in Australia.

The Latvian Prosecutor General's Office last week announced that it would launch a new investigation of Konrad Kalejs in order to discover "the actual circumstances of the case."

The office also sent letters to the justice ministries of the United States, Canada and Australia seeking information about Kalejs' past.

Kalejs, 84, is alleged to have been a member of the mobile killing squad known as the Arajs Kommando, or Latvian Auxiliary Security Police, that collaborated with the Nazi SS during World War II.

He is accused of having participated in the killing of 20,000 Jews in Latvia.

Kalejs, who moved to Australia after the war and later relocated to the United States, claims that he was a university student during the war.

Kalejs was ordered deported from the United States to Australia in 1994. He subsequently fled to Canada, where he lived for three years.

He was deported by Canada to Australia in August. Australian officials have said it is unlikely he would be prosecuted there.

In addition to announcing the new investigation, the Latvian Prosecutor General's Office rebuked the prosecutor who had been in charge of the Kalejs investigation, Uldis Strelis, saying it was "categorically disassociating" itself from Strelis' position.

Last month, Strelis said his investigative team had found no evidence to support any of the allegations against Kalejs.

After issuing his findings, Strelis made a number of anti-Semitic comments that prompted Latvian Jewish leaders to call for his dismissal. □

**AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD****Lubavitch open center to boost revival of Lithuanian community***By Lev Krichевsky*

MOSCOW (JTA) — Few Jewish groups have been more involved in the renewal of Jewish communal life in the former Soviet Union than the Lubavitch movement.

But when the Chasidic organization recently opened a new Jewish center in the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius, some observers found historical irony in the event.

This was because Vilnius, formerly known as Vilna, was known to generations of Eastern European Jews not only as a major center of Jewish learning, but also as the stronghold of opposition to Chasidism.

Indeed, it was the Vilna Gaon, the renowned commentator on the Talmud and the Torah, who stirred up controversy with his stiff opposition to the burgeoning Chasidic movement during the late 18th century.

To add to the irony, the new center opened a week after Lithuania's Jews commemorated in mid-September the 200th anniversary of the passing of the Gaon.

But according to Rabbi Shalom Ber Krinsky, who directs Lubavitch activities in Lithuania, there is little irony.

"The argument was over a long time ago," he said of the disagreements between Chasidic Jews and their opponents.

Krinsky's Lubavitch great-grandfather left Vilna for the United States in the late 19th century — which serves as proof, Krinsky said, that by that time the "Lubavitch tradition existed in Vilna as well."

Krinsky also pointed out that the Lubavitch movement established its first yeshiva in Vilna in the 1920s.

**Community once had dozens of synagogues**

Like other Jewish institutions that served the prewar Vilna community of 60,000, the yeshiva was destroyed during the Holocaust.

Before the center opened last month, the community that boasted dozens of synagogues before the war had a single Jewish house of worship that survived the Nazi occupation and the subsequent Communist regime.

Krinsky, a 29-year-old native of Boston, said elderly Jews constitute the large majority of those who currently attend services.

But he hopes that the new center's synagogue and other programs would succeed in attracting younger participants.

"We tailor much of our programming to singles and young families, most of whom are discovering and tasting their heritage for the first time," said Krinsky, who settled in Vilnius three years ago and is the only rabbi permanently based in the Lithuanian capital.

"Youth is the future of this community, and we feel it is important for them to incorporate some of the greatness, the spirit of Jewish Vilna into their lives," Krinsky added.

Vilnius' younger generation of Jews will not be the only ones to benefit from the new center.

The previous Lubavitch-operated soup kitchen served free hot meals to 100 elderly and needy Jews — many of them Holocaust survivors.

The bigger kitchen in the new center may help increase the number of meals served, Krinsky said.

Representatives of the Jewish community and the Lithuanian government participated in last month's ceremonies marking the opening of the 10,000 square-foot facility in the city once referred to as the "Jerusalem of Lithuania."

The latest in the chain of community centers opened by the worldwide Lubavitch movement to foster Jewish revival in the former Soviet Union, the center will also house the lower grades of a Lubavitch day school, a Sunday school and an evening yeshiva.

The premises also boast a library, a children's game room, a dining room and a computer room that will have a direct Internet connection.

Formerly a run-down apartment house, the building was purchased by the Lubavitch movement through the bequest of philanthropist Joseph Rohr of Nice, France, in whose memory the building was dedicated.

Emmanuel Zingeris, the only Jewish member of the Lithuanian Parliament, said at the dedication ceremonies that the center offered a future of hope to a community that had a glorious past.

"The new center is very important to a community that is coming to life, that is not just memorializing its dead, but is also rebuilding Jewish life," he said. □

**Novelist slams German policy of putting refugees in prison***By Deidre Berger*

FRANKFURT (JTA) — Germany's policy of deporting refugees is xenophobic, according to the novelist Gunter Grass.

Speaking at a ceremony held here Sunday honoring Turkish novelist Yasar Kemal, Grass said more than 4,000 refugees, primarily from Turkey, Algeria and Nigeria, have been put in prison pending deportation, although they have not committed any crimes.

"We are all inactive witnesses of a renewed barbarism, which this time is democratically sanctioned," Grass told his audience, which included high-ranking officials of Germany's ruling conservative government.

Grass accused the government of Chancellor Helmut Kohl of delivering weapons to the Turkish government, which he says is conducting a war of extermination against the Kurds. He also called on the German government to give citizenship to Turkish-born guest workers, many of whom have lived in Germany for decades.

Kemal was this year's recipient of the prestigious peace prize that is sponsored by the German Book Trade Association.

He was honored for his dedication to human rights — specifically his outspoken defense of Kurdish cultural independence — and for his commitment to the victims of persecution.

In his acceptance speech, Kemal accused the German government of treating the 2 million Turks living in Germany — the country's largest minority — as third-class citizens.

A German government spokesman dismissed Grass's comments as "unbelievable assertions."

The spokesman added that Germany had accepted more refugees from the Bosnian civil war than any other European country.

But observers noted that this asylum is only temporary, since most Bosnian war refugees in Germany are expected to return to their home country during the next three years.

Germany accepts applications for political asylum filed by refugees coming from a limited number of countries where Germany considers there to be a risk of political persecution.

Most requests are rejected.

Grass, who has frequently spoken out against right-wing tendencies in Germany, is the author of works including "The Tin Drum," one of the best-known novels dealing with the country's Nazi past. □