



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ **Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu** got mixed reviews after addressing 3,500 delegates at the General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations in Indianapolis. He urged Jewish unity and hinted at flexibility with the Palestinians. But some dismissed his words as empty rhetoric, particularly with regard to the religious pluralism issue. [Page 3]

■ **Ehud Barak, leader of Israel's Labor Party,** said, "I will never support, and the Labor Party will never support, any legislation that threatens to divide the Jewish people." Communal leaders attending the General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations applauded Barak's remarks, which were believed to be his most unequivocal position to date on religious pluralism legislation.

■ **At least 60 tourists were killed by terrorists** outside an ancient temple near the southern Egyptian town of Luxor. The gunmen were Islamic militants attempting to destabilize the government of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

■ **The United States found an Israeli citrus firm in violation of a U.S. law governing seized U.S. property in Cuba.** As a result of the violation of the Helms-Burton Act, the firm's Israeli officials and their families will be barred from entering the United States.

■ **Jonathan Pollard asked a beit din to rule on his contention that the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations has not actively sought his freedom.** [Page 4]

■ **The trial of former Vichy official Maurice Papon was delayed for an additional 10 days.** The trial was suspended last Friday after Papon, who allegedly deported 1,560 Jews when he was secretary-general of the Bordeaux region during World War II, was diagnosed with double pneumonia.

■ **Approximately 35 children were evacuated from an Orthodox Jewish school in Zurich after an anonymous bomb threat.** A police search failed to locate a bomb.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Swiss bedeviled by inability to do enough to satisfy critics

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — After seeing Switzerland's image take a relentless beating during the past year, Swiss officials say they deserve credit for the positive steps they have taken.

Just the same, some of the country's critics remain as vociferous as ever, believing that only unremitting pressure on the Swiss government and Swiss banks will bring about a full accounting of how the country behaved during World War II.

As part of a broad public relations campaign to counter charges about Switzerland's wartime actions, the Swiss ambassador to the United States, Alfred Defago, has been visiting several American Jewish communities to put forward his country's case.

During a recent weeklong trip to California, the ambassador addressed an average of five to eight groups a day — about one-third of them Jewish.

This week, Special Ambassador Thomas Borer, Switzerland's leading troubleshooter for dealing with the accusations against his country, was scheduled to meet with reporters in New York and Washington.

Beyond the arguments advanced by Swiss government officials, Swiss bankers are maintaining that they have come clean with a full accounting of Jewish assets deposited during the Holocaust era.

Swiss officials have also pointed to the establishment earlier this year of a nearly \$200 million Holocaust Memorial Fund to help needy survivors.

After months of delays, the first payments from the fund were slated to be distributed this week at a ceremony in Riga, Latvia.

But critics — including Holocaust survivors who say they still cannot lay claim to family assets — believe that the Swiss should not be let off easily.

More than two years after World Jewish Congress President Edgar Bronfman first met with the Swiss Bankers Association to demand a full investigation of accounts opened during the war, a total of nearly 16,000 names can be found on two separate lists of dormant bank accounts untouched since World War II.

The combined value of the accounts is about \$54.4 million, excluding accrued interest.

Inquiries have come in almost daily since Swiss banks released the first list of some 1,800 names in July.

So far about 30,000 people have inquired about that list, and around 3,000 have filed claims.

There was no immediate data available on the response generated by a second list released late last month, which contained 14,000 dormant accounts.

Of those, about 3,700 belonged to non-Swiss citizens, but the banks provided no assurances that they belonged to Holocaust survivors.

Taken together with the July list, the total number of dormant accounts opened by foreigners stands at about 5,500.

Some of the accounts opened by Swiss citizens were possibly opened on behalf of non-Swiss citizens and may have included Holocaust victims seeking a safe haven for their funds.

Lists did little to calm furor

The Swiss banks began their investigation of dormant accounts from World War II after being criticized by Jewish leaders for serving as the Nazis' bankers and for refusing to turn over accounts opened by Jews fleeing the Holocaust.

The lists — viewed by some as a barometer of the banks' good faith — have done little to calm the furor that has mounted over the course of the past year.

The World Jewish Congress characterized the latest Swiss list as "a step backwards," taking issue with the banks' decision not to make public the names on 64,000 accounts containing small balances.

Jewish officials also criticized the banks for omitting the names of Nazi officials and for initially requiring that the list be searched on the

Internet — at www.dormantaccounts.ch — by keyword name searches.

U.S. Senate Banking Committee Chairman Alfonse D'Amato (R-N.Y.) expressed outrage that the banks revealed thousands more dormant accounts after maintaining last year that they had been able to find only 774 accounts.

Others dismissed the release of the second list as a public relations gimmick.

After initially deciding to not publish the names in newspaper ads, the Swiss Bankers Association bowed to criticism and last week published all of the nearly 3,700 non-Swiss citizens on the latest list, taking out ads in the New York Times, the international edition of the *Neue Zuercher Zeitung* in Switzerland and *Yediot Achronot* in Israel.

The association also reverted to an easier system on the Internet, a move that allows viewers to see the full list of names.

The Swiss banks now insist that they have done everything possible to make the directories of unclaimed wealth complete.

And they say they are anxious to begin making payments quickly.

The banks "have no interest in keeping this money," said a spokesman for the Swiss Bankers Association in New York.

"If there is a match of the name with someone on the list and it seems clear that this person or this family is the owner or heir of the account, it should be paid out very rapidly. There should be no questions about it."

To that end, the Claims Resolution Tribunal, set up by an independent Swiss-Jewish panel that is now probing Swiss banks, is soon expected to begin the process of evaluating the approximately 3,000 claims that have been filed so far.

For some Holocaust survivors, the lists have only increased their frustration.

Many, like 72-year-old Estelle Sapir of New York, have not found their names on either list.

She said that in 1947 officials at Credit Suisse in Geneva confirmed her father had an account there, but refused to turn it over to her without a death certificate.

Fifty years later, seeing no end to the stonewalling, Sapir, along with thousands of other survivors, is continuing to press a class-action lawsuit against Swiss banks in the hope of bringing about a measure of justice.

"These dormant account lists are not the solution to this problem," several of the survivors pushing the lawsuit said in a statement last month.

"What about the money they took that is not accounted for, such as most of our claims?"

'They are looking for justice'

The Holocaust Claims Processing Office set up by the New York State Banking Committee has received more than 1,300 inquiries from people who believe they have accounts but did not find their names on either of the lists. About 300 have filed claims.

"They don't care about the money," said Alan Goodman, director of the office, which is serving survivors from around the world.

"They are looking for justice. They want someone to acknowledge that they had these assets and that they were unjustly taken away from them."

In the face of what they see as a never-ending stream of criticism about the way they have handled the search for dormant accounts, Swiss banking and government officials have, at times, sounded as exasperated as the Holocaust victims.

Responding to a recent letter from D'Amato

criticizing the banks' release of the latest list, Swiss Bankers Association President Georg Krayer wrote, "No other country, including the U.S., has taken as many positive steps as Switzerland, and no other country's banks have done what Swiss banks have done to bring justice to Holocaust survivors.

"It is unfair to demand a search and then criticize the searchers for being successful," he added.

During his recent trip to California, Defago struck one major theme in his public addresses and private meetings.

"While it may sometimes appear that Switzerland moves slowly, this is because the Swiss are a deliberate and prudent people," he said in one typical instance. "We ask Americans to please respect democratic rule."

Switzerland's appeals for fairness and restraint have received some support from the Clinton administration.

U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright had words of praise for the Swiss during a weekend visit to the capital of Bern — but she also urged the country to do more.

"I commend the people of Switzerland for the progress you have made thus far and encourage you to continue your efforts to do justice, build trust, move toward closure and bring this painful period of examining the past to a satisfactory end," she said.

And Stuart Eizenstat, undersecretary of state for economics and the administration's point man on the Nazi gold issue, has credited the Swiss with making "extraordinary progress in the last year, more than any other neutral country."

Nevertheless, some state government officials seem intent on taking punitive measures against the banks.

A handful of U.S. states have halted dealings with some or all Swiss banks, while other states are considering such a move.

All of this has resulted in growing frustration and anger in Switzerland.

There is a feeling that for every move the country makes toward resolution of the issue, the goal posts are continually being moved by its foreign critics, some Swiss officials say. □

(JTA correspondent Tom Tugend in Los Angeles contributed to this report.)

Poverty rate falls in Israel

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The Israeli poverty rate fell by 0.8 percent in 1996 — to 16 percent of the overall population.

According to figures released Monday by the National Insurance Institute, some 202,000 families lived below the poverty line in 1996, compared to 208,000 families the previous year.

The rate of children living below the poverty line fell from 23.2 percent to 21.4 percent, for a total of 301,000 children. The poverty line in Israel was set at about \$335 per month for an individual and about \$535 per month for a couple.

Labor Minister Eliyahu Yishai attributed the drop to a significant improvement in the ability of the National Insurance Institute to allocate money to counter negative developments in the economy, including rising unemployment.

He said he intended to fight planned cuts in the 1998 budget that would lower government support for children.

The cuts were part of a package proposed earlier this year by the Finance Ministry to reduce government deficits. □

Netanyahu urges Jewish unity, but his words get mixed reviews

By Matthew Dorf and Cynthia Mann

INDIANAPOLIS (JTA) — Delegates to the General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations delivered a tepid welcome to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu this week as he sought to soothe an angry North American Jewry.

In his only public appearance during a carefully crafted nine-hour visit on Sunday, Netanyahu attempted to quell the crisis over religious pluralism in Israel.

At the same time, the premier softened his rhetoric toward the Palestinians, hinting at a possible acceptance of a limited Palestinian state.

"I want to state at the outset as emphatically as I can: No one, nobody, can deprive a Jew of his Jewishness," Netanyahu said.

"The membership in our faith and people is not the exclusive domain of anyone," he said.

Netanyahu encouraged the more than 3,500 delegates to support the efforts of a commission trying to find a solution in the religious pluralism debate.

That committee, headed by Israeli Finance Minister Ya'acov Ne'eman, almost broke down last month when Reform and Conservative Jewish leaders threatened to press their cases in court and the Orthodox political parties threatened to revive legislation that would codify Orthodox control over conversions in Israel and local religious councils.

All sides stepped back from the brink, extending the deadline of the committee until Jan 31.

That extension averted an explosion of the issue at the gathering — one of the largest annual Jewish gatherings — here this week.

Underscoring the urgency of the issue, Dr. Conrad Giles, president of CJF, said preserving Jewish unity "has occupied the central-most focus of our activities in the past year."

While some people walked away convinced that Netanyahu was doing the best he could given political pressures, others believed his remarks did not break new ground on the issue that has caused a rift between Israel and many American Jews.

"He knew what his mission was," said Sidney Miller, a federation board member from Dayton, Ohio.

"He said all the right words, but I don't know if he can deliver."

'I listened to a lot of hot air'

But others were dismayed by the premier's remarks.

"The issue of pluralism is being talked about, but it's not being addressed," said Kathy Williams of San Francisco.

"I walked away feeling that I listened to a lot of hot air."

Others balked at the premier's claim that American Jewry does not understand the conversion controversy.

In his speech, Netanyahu had said that while he understood a feeling of "alienation," he believes that 99 percent of North American Jews do not know that the problem is confined to Israel and that the status of non-Orthodox conversions outside of Israel are not in jeopardy.

In what appeared to be a veiled criticism of the American Reform and Conservative movements, Netanyahu said, "Let us stop looking at each other as enemies. Let those who would divide us go elsewhere."

"It was disappointing. It was nothing but slogans," Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch, executive director of the Association

of Reform Zionists of America, the Reform movement's Zionist arm, said after the speech.

At an earlier private dinner with the United Jewish Appeal's top donors, sources said Netanyahu had pounded the podium and accused "elements" here of "trying to disrupt the process" of the Ne'eman Committee.

Amid rumors of progress in peace talks that may culminate in a meeting with Jordan's King Hussein later this week, the premier appeared to reach out to the Palestinians.

Netanyahu, who sources said may soon unveil his vision of a final-status settlement with the Palestinians, spoke of his desire to let the Palestinians "lead a national life in dignity and honor."

Netanyahu's 45-minute speech capped off a night emphasizing unity and reconciliation that extended as far as the Russian space station Mir, from which Indianapolis native and U.S. astronaut David Wolfe delivered taped greetings.

Wolfe welcomed Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to his hometown, where he recalled attending Sunday school. He also lauded the work of the federations, which he said is "of critical importance to Jews all over the world — and in space right now."

But Indianapolis Mayor Stephen Goldsmith's 8-year-old daughter, Olivia, stole the show when she said, in Hebrew and English, "Greetings of peace and welcome to Indianapolis."

While there were no fireworks at the event, a protest by five Jewish leaders sparked attention when they urged delegates to give Netanyahu a cool reception.

More than 2,000 flyers were distributed by Gerald Bubis, Henry and Edith Everett, Lynn Lyss and Leonard Fein.

"Respect for the prime minister does not require more than applause at the beginning and end of his remarks," the flyer said.

"If you share our distress regarding his policies on religious pluralism and/or the peace process, please do not respond in a manner that might confuse respect for the office with endorsement of the policies."

The five activists abandoned plans to carry large replicas of the flyers into the hall after G.A. and security officials threatened to have them evicted. □

Israeli firm invites former dictator

JERUSALEM (JTA) — An Israeli company has invited former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet for a private visit to Israel in a bid to sell military vehicles to Chile's defense forces.

Pinochet, who ruled Chile from 1973 to 1990, is currently commander of the army.

The Israeli daily Ha'aretz said that the Foreign Ministry expressed reservations about hosting Pinochet for an official visit.

Pinochet was invited to Israel by the firm Machshirei Tnuva in the hope of renewing the sale of military vehicles produced by a subsidiary company.

A spokesman for the firm said the company would cancel its invitation if it is opposed by the ministry.

The paper reported that Chile's previous ambassador to Israel, a former exile from Pinochet's regime, had threatened to quit if he visited Israel.

Labor Knesset member Yossi Beilin, who served as deputy foreign minister under the Labor government, convinced the former government to block a visit by Pinochet.

A Chilean human rights group has estimated that more than 3,100 people died as a result of human rights violations during Pinochet's rule. □

Pollard seeks beit din ruling against Presidents' Conference*By Debra Nussbaum Cohen*

NEW YORK (JTA) — Orthodox divorces and mundane business disputes are the bread and butter of Jewish religious courts.

Now, however, one of the country's most prominent religious courts is being asked to rule on convicted spy Jonathan Pollard's contention that the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations has been derelict by not actively seeking his freedom.

Pollard's spiritual adviser, Orthodox Rabbi Avi Weiss, of Bronx, N.Y., submitted a formal petition to the Beit Din of America on Nov. 11, asking them to hear Pollard's claim against the Conference of Presidents. The Conference is an umbrella organization that often represents American Jewish public opinion to the U.S. administration, particularly on matters relating to Israel.

Pollard, a former U.S. Navy intelligence officer who pleaded guilty in 1986 to spying for Israel, is serving a life sentence in federal prison in Butner, N.C.

Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents, said that he had not been officially informed of Pollard's effort, which he called "frivolous."

"I understand Pollard's frustration and that this is an expression of it," Hoenlein said. "We'll see if any beit din would accept" this case.

The Beit Din of America is connected with the Rabbinical Council of America, the main organization of centrist Orthodox clergy.

The court's senior judge, Rabbi Gedalia Dov Schwartz, was not aware of Pollard's request and the court's executive director, Rabbi Michael Broyde, did not return phone calls. But even if the beit din agrees to hear the case, its ruling would have little impact because the court could not enforce it.

Pollard, through frequent mailings to journalists and Jewish leaders, and phone calls placed by his second wife, Esther Pollard, has long publicized his sense of victimization by the Israeli and U.S. governments and by the organized Jewish community which, he says, has neglected his plight.

Why is he taking the Conference of Presidents, rather than another Jewish organization, to a beit din?

"The Conference is the address the American government goes to because they represent themselves as the government of our people," said Pollard in a telephone interview Tuesday conducted through his wife, Esther.

Pollard calls Conference 'unprincipled'

In a letter Jonathan Pollard faxed to Weiss on Nov. 4, he said, "This group's unprincipled indifference toward me constitutes a refusal on its part to honor two of our most important mitzvot," pidyon shevuyim, or redeeming captives, and pikuach nefesh, which means saving a life and which takes precedence over all other commandments.

"I can only hope that this action will finally compel the organization to act in a way that underscores our people's sense of compassion and accountability for one another," Pollard wrote in the letter, a copy of which was made available this week by his wife.

The Conference's Hoenlein says his group has done what it can to get Pollard paroled. It sent President Clinton a letter last year seeking his freedom, and its representatives have raised Pollard's situation "every time" that they have met with the president and other senior administration officials, Hoenlein said.

"From different people we've gotten different answers," he said in an interview from Indianapolis, where

he was attending the Council of Jewish Federations' General Assembly.

"We've heard security reasons why he has not been freed, political reasons as to why, but five out of the five government agencies involved recommended against his release," Hoenlein said.

Clinton has twice refused to commute Pollard's sentence, as did President Bush once before him.

Not everyone agrees Pollard's case is the Jewish communal establishment's concern.

"We made a concerted effort to ascertain if there was any anti-Semitism involved in his trial, sentencing or incarceration, and we could find no evidence of it," said Phil Baum, executive director of the American Jewish Congress and a member of the Conference of Presidents. "Short of that, it's not relevant to us." □

Russian city's Jewish community confronts a hostile environment*By Lev Krichevsky*

MOSCOW (JTA) — The Russian city of Orel's small Jewish community is facing uneasy times.

The trial of a neo-Nazi leader and the difficulties in recovering the city's synagogue are among the events that have highlighted the unpleasant atmosphere for the 3,000 Jews in Orel.

"Local officials are secretly backing ultranationalists who are very visible in our town," Semyon Livshitz, leader of the Orel Jewish community, said in a recent interview.

In the trial, Vladimir Gusev, a Russian Orthodox priest in Orel, lashed out at Jews and Judaism in his recent testimony on behalf of Igor Semyonov, the head of the local chapter of the Russian National Unity group.

Gusev, who referred to Judaism as an "aggressive" and "destructive" religion, repeated the infamous blood libel charge, saying Chasidic Jews "kill children, gather blood" and use it to make matzah.

Semyonov is being tried for allegedly arranging the murder of an elderly woman in Orel a year and a half ago so that his relative could get her apartment.

He also was charged with inciting racial and ethnic hatred.

After his arrest, police found a list of hundreds of Jews and their addresses at his home in Orel, which is located 150 miles south of Moscow.

Gusev has not been the only witness to make anti-Semitic statements in the trial, which began in September. A local communist leader claimed that the 1941 mass killings at Babi Yar near Kiev, Ukraine, never happened.

According to Emmanuel Mendelevich, a human rights activist in Orel, all of the anti-Semitic remarks were allowed by the judge without objection.

Meanwhile, local authorities have impeded the Jewish community's efforts to reclaim the city's only synagogue.

While authorities have agreed to return the building, which was built in 1912 and confiscated by the Bolsheviks in 1922, they are demanding that the Jewish community help pay for the construction of a new building to house a technical college that now occupies the former synagogue.

"The sum is \$1.8 million," said Livshitz, adding that the community would be unable to raise even one-tenth of that amount. All other faiths "were given back the property formerly belonging to them with no compensation for the city."

Jewish leaders have been told by city officials that the sum could be easily collected if the community "turned to the world Jewry," said Livshitz. □