



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ Israel's absorption minister visited Jonathan Pollard in jail, marking the first official visit by an Israeli government official. Yuli Edelstein brought a pledge from the Israeli premier to try to secure Pollard's release. Pollard is serving a life sentence for spying for Israel.

■ Pro-Israel political action committees and individuals contributed \$4.2 million to candidates for U.S. federal office in 1995-1996, according to a study by the Center for Responsive Politics, a Washington-based, non-partisan organization that analyzes the role of money in politics.

■ California's insurance commissioner promised to help thousands of the state's residents collect on insurance policies stemming from the Holocaust era. Commissioner Chuck Quackenbush made the pledge during a hearing on the issue.

■ More than 40 Australian athletes who survived the collapse of the Maccabiah Games' bridge this summer will sue Israel, the Maccabi World Union, the Tel Aviv Municipality and the company that built the bridge, according to their lawyer. Four Australians died in the incident at the opening of the Games.

■ Antanas Mineikis, a suspected war criminal, died in Lithuania. Mineikis, 80, was deported from the United States in 1992 for concealing his service in a Nazi-led execution squad. Citing lack of evidence, Lithuanian prosecutors had dropped their probe into his activities. [Page 2]

■ Israeli Knesset members attacked a Swiss envoy for not doing enough to acknowledge his country's cooperation with the Nazis. The remarks came as Thomas Borer defended his nation's actions before a Knesset committee.

■ Jewish leaders urged the international community to return looted Nazi gold worth about \$70 million to Holocaust survivors. An international conference slated to be held in London next week will consider whether to use the gold to compensate Holocaust victims or return it to nations whose reserves were plundered in World War II.

ISRAEL TURNS 50

A key U.N. official recalls drama of the partition plan

By Peter Ephross

NEW YORK (JTA) — It was 50 years ago, but William Epstein still remembers the speech David Ben-Gurion made in the fall of 1947 to the United Nations committee deciding the fate of Palestine.

Many of the Zionist leaders had already spoken before the Ad Hoc Committee on Palestine.

Epstein recalls that Chaim Weizmann impressed the committee members with the gentle nature of his diplomatic appeal, as did Abba Eban with his eloquence.

But even though there was nothing special about Ben-Gurion's appearance — Epstein remembers the Zionist leader's trademark bald head with its shock of white hair and his ordinary suit — Ben-Gurion's "short, sharp" speech impressed the young Canadian.

It lasted no more than 15 or 20 minutes, and ended in part, as Epstein recalls it, with the following words: "We want a Jewish state in Palestine and an Arab-Jewish alliance."

By the end of November, the fledgling international body had granted Ben-Gurion — and the rest of the Zionist community — part of his goal.

Fifty years ago this week, on Nov. 29, 1947, the United Nations voted to partition Palestine, giving international legitimacy to a modern Jewish state.

"It was an electrifying moment. The Jewish people had waited for 2,000 years, and the highest authority in the world had decided to grant them a Jewish state," says Epstein.

And the young civil servant played an important behind-the-scenes role in its creation.

His report recommending partition, written while he was working in the Middle East and Africa affairs section, caught the eye of then-U.N. Secretary-General Trygve Lie and was used by the U.N.'s committee on Palestine.

A remarkably spry 85-year-old who still reports for work every day at the U.N. complex on Manhattan's East River, Epstein, the international body's longest-serving employee, is a living historical archive to the United Nations.

In his more than half-century there, he has become an expert on disarmament, authoring several books and publishing more than 300 articles on the subject.

He is currently a consultant for Richard Butler, the executive chairman of the United Nations Special Commission dealing with the disarmament of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction.

Heady — and optimistic — times

He has also been a member of the Canadian delegation to the U.N.'s General Assembly six times and was honored in 1989 by being appointed an officer of the Order of Canada — an equivalent to British knighthood.

A Canadian artillery officer during World War II — and a lawyer by training — Epstein was in London in 1945, working to settle claims against the Canadian government for damages committed by its soldiers.

He received a telephone call from the Canadian high commissioner, offering to recommend him for a position with the preparatory committee that was working to establish the United Nations.

He was first assigned to the U.N.'s Security Council Department. Soon after the United Nations moved its offices to New York in the spring of 1946, however, Epstein, the son of a Zionist leader from the Canadian city of Calgary, was assigned to the department's Middle East and Africa section.

Those were heady — and optimistic — times in the international community, particularly for those interested in Palestine.

The United Nations had just been created, and in the aftermath of the Holocaust, the question of Palestine was one of the main issues on the new organization's agenda.

In fact, the United Nations held a special session on the Palestine question in the spring of 1947 at the request of the British, which had

controlled the area since World War I under a League of Nations Mandate.

The assembly created a United Nations Special Committee on Palestine to look into the issue.

The Arabs opposed UNSCOP's work, believing that it would leave the Jews with a state and the Palestinian Arabs without one.

Attaining international support for a Jewish homeland was a difficult task.

The support of the United States was not guaranteed. Indeed, there were many within the State Department that staunchly opposed the creation of such an entity.

And both Britain and France had ties through their colonies to the Arab world.

Of the superpowers, in fact, the Soviet Union was the country most unambiguously in favor of a plan that would lead to Jewish sovereignty.

While the Communist state was anti-nationalist, the Soviet Union saw the end of the British Mandate as a way to weaken Britain in the Middle East.

Epstein was one of three advisers on the Palestine issue in the Security Council Department.

As the Jewish adviser, he was assigned to interact with the Jewish Agency, the pre-state authority of Jewish Palestine.

He also wrote one of three reports on the Palestine question — the other two were written by an Arab and a Englishman. Epstein's report was the only one that proposed partition, and the one favored by Secretary-General Lie, a Norwegian who was familiar with the horrors of Nazism.

It wasn't always clear sailing being a Jew — or an Arab, for that matter — working on the Palestine issue.

In June of 1947, an UNSCOP delegation went to Palestine on a fact-finding mission. Epstein and his Arab counterpart, Saleh Mahmoud of Egypt, were kicked off the trip at the last moment — presumably to avoid possible complaints about their objectivity.

The trip went ahead with Eban, who became one of Israel's most famous politicians and effective diplomats, as one of the guides, representing the Jewish Agency.

The UNSCOP delegates were not always well informed. Eban remembers that after visiting a kibbutz, the Indian delegate said to him, "All right, we have seen a Jewish kibbutz; I assume that we shall be seeing an Arab kibbutz tomorrow?"

'It was touch-and-go'

On Aug. 31, UNSCOP made its recommendation: Seven of the 11 members favored two independent states, separate politically but in economic union, and a separate status for Jerusalem.

UNSCOP's decision motivated the United States to come out publicly in favor of the plan for the first time.

Zionist leaders spent the rest of the autumn convincing members of the United Nations that they should vote for the partition plan.

"It was touch-and-go," says Epstein.

The vote was scheduled for Nov. 27, but Zionist leaders did not have the requisite number of votes. After a day of filibustering, the General Assembly's president, Oswaldo Aranha of Brazil, postponed the vote until the 29th, the day after Thanksgiving.

The United States, under instructions from President Truman, and Zionist leaders spent the days cajoling leaders from countries as far-flung as Haiti and Liberia to support the plan, which gave roughly 60 percent of Mandatory Palestine to the Jewish state.

On the evening of Nov. 29, when the vote was announced — 33 in favor, 13 against, with 10 abstentions — cheers rang out in the hall.

Arab countries stormed out of the room.

Those who had been unable to get into the General Assembly — and thousands of other Jews in New York, Jerusalem and around the world — danced in the streets.

Eban, along with Weizmann and other yishuv leaders, drank a bottle of champagne.

But the excitement that engulfed them — and the Jewish community — soon gave way to a more sobering reality. Just three days later, Arabs attacked Jerusalem, Haifa and Jaffa.

But Eban says that half a century later, the partition vote remains historic.

"Its importance has increased with time," he believes.

"The Israeli state has always had a problem with legitimacy, and legitimacy is the one thing the U.N. does define." □

Suspected war criminal dies before Lithuania pursues justice

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — A Lithuanian suspected of committing war crimes during the Nazi occupation has died without ever being brought to trial.

Antanas Mineikis, 80, died Monday at an old-age home. He had recently suffered a stroke, according to news reports.

His death came as Lithuania launched an investigation into another suspected war criminal, Kazys Gimzauskas.

But Jewish officials continue to question Lithuania's willingness to move against suspected war criminals living in the country.

Nazi hunters say Lithuania is reluctant to move against suspected war criminals because it would dredge up the issue of local collaboration with the Nazis during World War II.

After the war, Mineikis fled Lithuania and settled in the United States.

He was deported to Lithuania after he was stripped of his U.S. citizenship in 1992 for concealing his wartime service in a Nazi-led execution squad.

The Lithuanian prosecutor-general had investigated Mineikis' past, but later stopped the probe, citing a lack of evidence.

Lithuania began legal proceedings against another suspected war criminal, Alexander Lileikis, who was also stripped of his U.S. citizenship. But action against Lileikis, 90, was postponed in July when medical experts determined that he was not fit to stand trial.

Under Lithuanian law, suspects cannot be brought to trial if medical experts rule that they are too ill.

Lithuania's Parliament delayed action last month on an amendment that would change that law, prompting Jewish activists to complain that the government would prefer to wait for Lileikis' death.

Earlier this week, Lithuania launched an investigation of Gimzauskas.

The 89-year-old is suspected of having handed Jews over to death squads in the capital of Vilnius during World War II, when he was deputy head of the Nazi-sponsored Lithuanian security police, known as the Saugumas.

Jewish officials cautiously welcomed the decision to investigate Gimzauskas.

Efraim Zuroff, director of the Simon Wiesenthal Center's Israel office, said in a statement, "The question at present is whether the opening of this investigation represents a sincere attempt to achieve justice or is merely a ploy to gain points in Western public opinion." □

Jewish legal experts welcome settlement of N.J. school case

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Jewish legal activists are welcoming a New Jersey school board's decision to settle a major affirmative action case out of court.

Last week, just as the U.S. Supreme Court was preparing to hear the case, Piscataway Board of Education vs. Taxman, the school board agreed to pay \$433,500 to Sharon Taxman, a white teacher whom the board had laid off in 1989 while retaining a black teacher with equal qualifications. The school board said it made its decision to fire Taxman under its affirmative action policy.

Fearing that the high court's ruling could have proved disastrous for affirmative action, a coalition of civil rights groups not directly involved in the case agreed to pay about 70 percent of the settlement. Although the Jewish community has long been divided over the issue of racial- and gender-based preferences, most legal activists agreed that the Piscataway case was not the appropriate vehicle for a potential landmark ruling by the high court.

"It's clear that the old adage that bad cases make for bad law applies in this instance," said Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Reform movement's Religious Action Center and an expert on church-state law.

"This particular case," he added, "clouds the moral argumentation for affirmative action and therefore ill serves the cause of civil rights and civil justice."

In negotiating a settlement, the civil rights coalition, led by the Black Leadership Forum, opted against having their day in a court that has shown increasing hostility toward affirmative action policies.

"The civil rights groups are quite correct, they would have lost this case in the Supreme Court. So, from their point of view, it was wise to withdraw it," said Marc Stern, co-director of the legal department of the American Jewish Congress. The AJCongress had filed a friend-of-the-court brief supporting the fired teacher, but urging the court not to issue a sweeping ruling in the case.

The Anti-Defamation League, which traditionally has supported diversity but opposes affirmative action as discriminatory, called the settlement "sensible."

A 'victory' for 'all Americans'

"It is a victory both for Sharon Taxman and for all Americans who oppose race-based decision-making in employment," said Abraham Foxman, national director of ADL, which also filed a friend-of-the-court brief supporting Taxman. "Our society cannot further the cause of equal treatment by preferring one race over another," Foxman said.

At issue in this case was the question of whether racial consideration could be used to exclude an individual or if such choices could only be made to remedy the effect of past discrimination. In prior cases, the Supreme Court has held that affirmative action programs used to remedy past discrimination are constitutional.

Although it remains uncertain whether the court will take another affirmative action case during its current term, Stern said, "It's inevitable that the court will come back to this issue." □

South African chief rabbi stirs debate on imposing wealth tax

By Michael Belling

JOHANNESBURG (JTA) — The South African chief rabbi's apparent support for a new tax on the wealthy has angered some local Jews.

Chief Rabbi Cyril Harris caused the stir with

testimony last week before the country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which has been attempting to resolve issues left over from the era of apartheid and heal the nation's wounds from that period.

At issue was whether Harris, who was testifying on the role played by religious organizations under apartheid, had expressed support for a proposal put forward by an academic that an annual tax of 0.5 percent of assets be assessed on people with a net worth of more than \$422,000.

Responding to a question from the commission after his prepared testimony, Harris said: "I am not an economist, only a preacher, but I have heard favorable comment" about the proposal.

Some Jewish businessmen responded with outrage over what they perceived as Harris' support for the academic's proposal.

Others said that while the question posed by the commission referred to the proposal, Harris' reply referred in general terms only to "equalization" and redistribution via "some kind of wealth tax."

They also pointed out that Harris had voiced fears about the proposal — the rabbi said that South Africa was already a heavily taxed country and that a wealth tax could be a disincentive for investment.

The critics, however, pointed to another statement from Harris: "I feel religious communities have to endorse practical programs for redistribution."

Marlene Bethlehem, national chairwoman of the South Africa Jewish Board of Deputies, who was present at the hearing, said Harris "did not answer on behalf of all Jews in South Africa and he did not commit us to such a tax."

"The media, and especially the radio, highlighted this comment, which was only a response to a question."

During his testimony, Harris acknowledged the "failings" of the Jewish community in the apartheid years, noting that although many Jews did not agree with the regime and had some kind of "awkward tension" about it, most members of the Jewish community benefited from it.

"In that the Jewish community benefited from apartheid, an apology must be given to this commission," Harris said.

He added that many Jews had not been silent about the evils of apartheid and that some had suffered as a result.

"Distancing oneself from the anguished cry of the majority and myopically pursuing one's own interests can never be morally justified," he said. □

Lenin appears on Swiss bank list

NEW YORK (JTA) — It's recorded in the history books as one of those fateful moments — in the spring of 1917 Lenin traveled by train from Zurich to Russia, where he would soon lead the Bolshevik Revolution.

Now it appears that he may have left something behind.

The most recent list of holders of dormant Swiss bank accounts opened prior to 1945 lists a Wladimir Ulyanov — the German spelling of Lenin's given name — with a hometown of Zurich.

"We do not know whether this is the real Lenin," said a spokesman for the Swiss Bankers Association, which published the list last month.

In any event, Ulyanov, or his heirs, are not going to become millionaires — the account has less than \$71 in it.

The recent list of 14,000 account holders, which included 3,700 non-Swiss citizens, was the second one published by the Swiss Bankers Association this year. □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Spotlight on Latvian survivors reveals other assistance efforts

By Lev Krichevsky

RIGA, Latvia (JTA) — Holocaust survivors in Latvia were thrust into the spotlight last week when they received the first payments from a Swiss fund created to help needy survivors.

But with a lot less fanfare, other groups have been quietly helping this small community of survivors.

For the past five to six years, a group known as the Jewish Survivors of Latvia in the United States has been distributing \$200 a year to each Holocaust survivor in Latvia.

"We have many people who cannot afford to give anything because they are immigrants, yet everybody tries to help," said Steven Springfield, the group's president.

Springfield, 74, who lives in Roslyn Heights, N.Y., helped form the organization of Holocaust survivors and Latvian immigrants in the mid 1980s. It now includes more than 400 families.

In 1989 — nearly 45 years after the end of World War II — Springfield and other survivors returned to Latvia to reconnect with the community and pay their respects to family members who had died.

"When we first started coming, there were 140 survivors," he said. "Now there are only 80 left. Most have passed away, and the rest live in extremely difficult circumstances."

Springfield, who lived in a Latvian ghetto before being deported to a concentration camp, was on hand at a ceremony in the Latvian capital of Riga last week when the first recipients of the Swiss Holocaust Memorial Fund accepted their \$400 checks.

Riva Shefere, 75, said it was "a pure coincidence" that she was the first to receive the payment.

'It's a coincidence I stayed alive'

"It's also a coincidence that I stayed alive," said Shefere, who had escaped death by sneaking away from a column of labor camp inmates being marched off to be shot. She spent the rest of the war in hiding.

As the first recipient, Shefere became an instant celebrity.

After news reports quoted her as saying she wanted to buy a washing machine, but that the sum wouldn't cover it, three Americans have come forward to offer to buy her one, according to Gideon Taylor, assistant executive vice president of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.

The memorial fund was established in February by Switzerland's three largest banks amid allegations that the Swiss banks were hoarding the wealth of Holocaust victims.

The fund's board agreed in July to earmark an \$11 million initial distribution to Jewish Holocaust survivors in Eastern and Central Europe, each of whom is slated to get a total of \$1,000.

The JDC, which organized the Nov. 18 ceremony at Riga's Jewish community center, is overseeing the fund's disbursements, which will include an additional \$600 check for each Latvian survivor.

At the spacious three-story classical building that had once housed the Riga Jewish Theater, some recipients dismissed the payments.

Yevgenia Barowska, 75, who spent much of the war in a concentration camp, called the \$400 check "insulting."

But while she and other survivors criticized the sum, other elderly recipients appeared to be satisfied.

"Swiss financial organizations today are recognizing their historical responsibility," said Margers Vestermanis, 72, who spent part of World War II in Nazi labor camps and, after escaping, hid in a forest until liberation.

Meer Slavin, 83, who was unable to attend the ceremony because he is paralyzed and homebound, said during an interview at his home, "Any help we can get can make a difference."

Springfield refers to the survivors living in Latvia as "triple victims" — victimized first by the Nazis, then by the Soviet regime, and again, following Latvian independence, by terrible economic conditions.

Nearly all of the survivors live on monthly pensions of about \$80.

Survivors in Latvia also are looking to the German government to provide compensation.

"We don't want compensation from Switzerland, but we do want Germany to compensate us," said Shefere, one of the few survivors of the Riga Ghetto, whose painful memories prevented her until last year from returning to the site of the former ghetto — now a residential neighborhood.

Representatives of Latvian Holocaust survivors have been negotiating with Germany for several years in an effort to receive reparations for their suffering during the war, according to Alexander Bergman, chairman of the Latvian Jewish Society of Former Prisoners of Ghettos and Concentration Camps.

Germany has paid more than \$54 billion in compensation to Holocaust survivors since World War II, but those living in Soviet-bloc countries were unable to apply for compensation during the Cold War.

Bergman recently joined a delegation from the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, which is currently negotiating with German officials for compensation payments to Holocaust survivors in Eastern Europe.

Several years ago, Bergman toured 10 German cities to discuss the impoverished situation of the Latvian Holocaust survivors.

As an unintended result of his efforts, private German citizens began channeling funds through Christian interfaith groups to help the Latvian survivors.

The aid has been distributed to individual survivors in Latvia, to social service programs serving their needs and to programs helping 28 Christians who risked their lives to save Jews during the Nazi occupation of the Baltic nation.

Efforts to press Germany continue

Bergman described this aid as the "good will of kind people," but added that "private individuals are taking the government's responsibility upon themselves" and that efforts would continue to force Germany to pay restitution.

For the head of the U.S.-based support group, the role of Latvian expatriates has been critical.

"For so many years, nobody raised a finger for the Holocaust survivors," said Springfield.

"We were the only ones who used to come year after year."

His organization has also been distributing small sums to Jewish war veterans and to righteous gentiles.

Some funding also goes toward soup kitchens and "Meals on Wheels" programs in Latvia, which are run in partnership with the JDC.

The undertaking has yielded nearly \$300,000 in distributions since the early 1990s, said Springfield. □

(JTA correspondent Daniel Kurtzman in Washington contributed to this report.)