

NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ **U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright defended the Clinton administration's stance that the impasse in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process hampered efforts to assemble a coalition in the recent crisis with Iraq.** "The reality we have to deal with is that when the peace process is stalled, our influence in the region is affected," she wrote to the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. She was responding to the group's leaders, who had written they were "deeply concerned" about the administration's linkage of the issues.

■ **U.S. State Department spokesman James Rubin said Israel's decision in principle to further withdraw from the West Bank was "a step in the right direction."** Palestinians have already rejected the proposal, calling it an attempt to rewrite the Oslo peace accords.

■ **Jewish officials held a special meeting in Britain's House of Lords prior to an international Nazi gold conference set to open Tuesday in London.** Jewish officials outlined several goals of the conference, including a decision by the Tripartite Gold Commission to distribute between \$60 and \$70 million under its control to needy Holocaust survivors. [Page 1]

■ **A Russian commission revived its investigation into an alleged Jewish conspiracy in the 1918 death of Czar Nicholas II and his family.** The question was one of 10 submitted to the commission in 1995 by the governing body of the Russian Orthodox Church. [Page 3]

■ **A bomb exploded outside the western Jerusalem apartment of three Arab Israeli women.** None of the residents were hurt, but a policeman called to the site was slightly injured. The incident was believed to be the latest attempt to force the women to move out of their home.

■ **Israeli officials said there were no plans to invite Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan for a visit.** Farrakhan, who was slated to leave Monday, said he hopes to visit Israel during his controversial tour, which is scheduled to include Syria, Iraq, Libya and Cuba.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES**Nazi gold gathering forces all nations to 'examine consciences'**

By Daniel Kurtzman

LONDON (JTA) — As historians, politicians, Holocaust survivors and Jewish officials gathered here this week for an unprecedented international conference examining the movements of Nazi gold, few failed to grasp the meeting's historical significance.

As one Jewish leader observed, never before have so many nations come together "to consider how they might start on the road to justice for the Jewish people."

It is a search that dates back half a century.

But it was not until last year, amid startling revelations about Switzerland's wartime gold transactions and handling of Jewish assets, that the search came into focus and acquired a sense of urgency.

More embarrassing disclosures have since spread all along the trail of Nazi gold, showing that other neutral nations either bought, hid or traded Nazi loot as well.

With each new turn, Jewish leaders have intensified their demands for a full historical accounting, both financial and moral.

The three-day conference here — which drew representatives of some 40 countries and six non-governmental agencies — was a testament to how far that accounting has come.

"There are 40 nations here to examine their consciences," said Lord Greville Janner, chairman of Britain's Holocaust Educational Trust, who helped convince Britain's ruling Labor Party to host the conference and persuaded several hedging countries to attend.

"It's not just Switzerland," said Janner, a Jew and former legislator, at a news conference.

"It's Germany, where it all began. It's Russia, where there's a great bounty of art which belonged to Nazi victims.

"It's Britain, it's the United States — all of us working together at last to cooperate."

While the gathering constitutes an achievement in itself, Jewish officials say the success of the conference ultimately will be measured by its ability to further the process of attaining moral restitution for victims of the Holocaust — specifically an acknowledgement of all the facts, of all wrongdoing and of a collective responsibility to find the truth.

Conference seen as a 'way station'

In that sense, the conference is not being viewed as a culminating point but as an intermediary step — a "way station," as one official put it, on the road to complete justice.

The conference is being held under the auspices of the Tripartite Gold Commission, set up in 1946 by the United States, Britain and France to restore Nazi-looted gold to its rightful owners.

During the last 50 years, the commission distributed 337 tons of looted gold — 98.6 percent of the amount in its pool — to 15 countries whose treasuries were plundered as the Nazis marched across Europe.

Another 5.6 tons, worth between \$60 and \$70 million, is still held by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York and by the Bank of England. The commission froze its distribution last year after Jewish groups insisted that privately owned gold taken from Holocaust victims be returned to survivors or their heirs.

While the conference, slated for Tuesday through Thursday, was expected to produce an agreement among the claimant countries to place the remaining gold into a fund to compensate Holocaust victims, Jewish officials set their sights on additional goals.

Most notably, officials were seeking a commitment among all those attending to make all relevant historical files available, including the records of the Tripartite commission.

"We have a mission which is beyond money," said Edgar Bronfman, president of the World Jewish Restitution Organization, which met in London prior to the Nazi gold conference.

"There are moral issues here which have to take precedence," he

said. In fact, a proposal for full disclosure was expected to come from an unlikely corner.

Special Ambassador Thomas Borer, Switzerland's point man on the Nazi gold controversy, said in an interview that he planned to formally propose to the conference that every nation come clean with all relevant archival documents.

"We said at the very outset we want to know the truth," Borer said, "but it's very difficult if we can only rely on the Swiss archives."

Jewish leaders, for their part, welcomed the Swiss delegation's decision to make the appeal.

There were other plaudits for Switzerland this week.

The World Jewish Congress and the WJRO invited Borer to a dinner for its delegates, and the Swiss envoy gave a speech that won rare praise from some of his nation's harshest critics.

Borer acknowledged that Switzerland handled the "initial allegations" concerning Switzerland's wartime dealings in a "very, very poor way," adding that it learned lessons "the hard way."

"But I'm proud that I can say that we took unprecedented measures and I'm also proud that I can say that we've lived up to our promises.

"If you ask me if I'm satisfied with whatever we do," he added, "I must tell you I am not because whatever our generation is doing today, it can never make up for the mistakes of other generations. We can be sorry, but we can never correct them."

While the London conference was not expected to single out Switzerland for its wartime activities or the way it has handled criticism, another conference being convened in New York next week almost certainly will.

That conference, initiated by New York City Comptroller Alan Hevesi, who lost family members in the Holocaust, will examine moves by U.S. state and local governments to halt dealings with Swiss banks.

Indeed, conferences appear to be the order of the day.

The United States was expected this week to propose convening a follow-up to the London conference next April at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington.

As part of the broad inquiry into wartime trade and plunder, the conference in Washington would deal with "other assets" — most notably priceless art works confiscated by the Nazis.

Looking further down the road, Bronfman said he would like to see yet another conference convened to bring closure to all these issues, perhaps within two to three years.

He wants a historical commission, charged with gathering all the facts surrounding Nazi plunder and stolen Jewish wealth in every country, to report its findings for all to see.

If that happens, he said, "the final chapter of World War II and the Holocaust can be written fairly and decently and honestly." □

Probe of Swiss banks dealings with Nazis reveals deeper ties

By Mitchell Danow

NEW YORK (JTA) — Swiss commercial banks bought three times more gold from Nazi Germany than previously believed, according to a commission appointed by the Swiss government.

The commission's announcement that private Swiss banks purchased more than \$61 million in gold looted by the Nazis could open the door to demands that the banks

give up the the gold, which they bought from Germany between 1939 and 1945 for their own accounts or for customers.

The total comes in addition to the more than \$389 million in purchases that the Swiss central bank made from the German Reichsbank, according to the preliminary report issued Monday by the Independent Commission of Experts.

The Swiss commission issued its report a day before officials from 40 countries were to meet in London to exchange the latest information about Nazi gold.

It also came amid reports that the United States in 1952 melted down gold apparently looted by the Nazis from Holocaust victims and turned it over to European central banks.

The report, based on recently declassified documents, was also expected to be presented at this week's conference in London.

Under the terms of a 1946 agreement with the Tripartite Gold Commission, Switzerland returned some \$58 million of the looted gold known to have made its way to Switzerland's central bank.

Established in September 1946 by the United States, Britain and France, the Tripartite commission was charged with the distribution of gold looted by the Nazis from the central banks of those European countries they had overrun.

But that agreement did not cover private Swiss banks.

Of the more than \$61 million in private bank deals, the report said, the largest purchase from the Nazis was made by the Swiss Bank Corp., which bought \$36.6 million.

Bank Leu, now a subsidiary of Credit Suisse Group, came in second with a purchase of \$12 million. Union Bank of Switzerland was third, with \$8.5 million in purchases.

The report also indicated that Credit Suisse purchased \$1.8 million in Nazi-looted gold.

The commission is made up of an international panel of historians that was created by Switzerland last December to study the extent of the country's financial dealings with the Nazis.

The group is also known as the Bergier Commission, after its chairman, the Swiss historian Jean-Francois Bergier.

The preliminary report, based on a survey of archives in four countries, also found that the Nazis confiscated \$146 million from individuals during the war.

\$2.5 million taken from death camp inmates

Of this, at least \$2.5 million had been confiscated by the SS from inmates at death camps in Eastern Europe, the report said.

It cautioned, however, that this total was a minimum, adding that other estimates of as much as \$4 million in the so-called Melmer accounts could well be true.

The Melmer accounts were named after SS officer Bruno Melmer, who was responsible for laundering gold looted from death camp victims.

But the 23-page report did not say whether Swiss bankers knew that some of the gold they bought came from Holocaust victims.

It also avoided saying whether the Swiss bankers' purchases helped the Nazis prolong their war effort.

In this respect, it stopped short of the conclusions contained in a blistering 200-page U.S. government report that was issued in May.

That report accused Switzerland of cynically profiting from the war and of bankrolling the Nazi war machine through its purchases of Nazi gold. □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES**Probe of czar's death examines allegations of Jewish conspiracy**

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — The exact circumstances surrounding the deaths of Russia's last imperial family have long been shrouded in mystery.

But the confusion took a bizarre turn when the Russian Orthodox Church asked: Did Czar Nicholas II and his family perish in "a ritual murder" perpetrated by a Jewish conspiracy?

No matter how strange the question might seem, it is listed on the agenda of a Russian government commission charged with investigating the death of the czar and his family and identifying his remains.

The commission had been in a state of limbo since 1995, but was revived last month by its new chairman, Russia's first deputy prime minister, Boris Nemtsov, who said he planned to complete the probe by January.

The question about a Jewish role in the imperial family's death in 1918 was one of 10 questions submitted to the commission in 1995 by the Holy Synod, the governing body of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Also on the list are questions related to the recently discovered remains of family members and the whereabouts of Alexei, the teen-age heir to Nicholas II, who abdicated on the eve of the Russian Revolution.

Church officials said they raised the question about a possible Jewish conspiracy in the hope that the government commission would help put to rest a myth still believed by a certain portion of their flock.

Metropolitan Yuvenali, a representative of the Russian Orthodox Church on the commission, said in an interview that the question was a response to "multiple publications on this matter, both immediately after the [1917 Bolshevik] revolution and in our days."

Yuvenali added that an official government document certifying that Jewish ritual murders have never taken place would be useful.

But the fact that the church raised the question at all could be seen as testimony to the persistence of anti-Semitic beliefs among some members of the church's nationalist wing.

Moscow's chief rabbi, Pinchas Goldschmidt, said he was "very concerned" by the development and would demand an apology from the Russian Orthodox Church.

"As the Russian Orthodox Church is trying to strengthen its stand as a state religion and to return to its old pre-revolutionary glory, certain movements within the church would like to return to the anti-Semitic views of the past," Goldschmidt said, adding that church anti-Semitism is a "growing concern within the Russian Jewish community."

Acid-burned bones given DNA tests

What happened to the royal family has long occupied the Russian people.

Czar Nicholas, his wife Alexandra, their children and servants were shot by a Bolshevik firing squad in the summer of 1918 in Yekaterinburg, a city in the Ural Mountains about 1,000 miles east of Moscow.

Interest in the imperial family has now spread to the United States with the recent release of the animated film "Anastasia," which deals with the legend that one of the czar's daughters escaped execution.

Acid-burned bones believed to belong to family members were discovered in 1991 in a pit near Yekaterinburg. DNA tests appear to confirm that the remains are those of Nicholas and his family, but the issue remains emotional, and disagreement over a burial site — Moscow,

St. Petersburg or Yekaterinburg — remains an obstacle to resolving the issue.

The belief in a conspiracy by Jews against Russia is held by some right-wing nationalist members of the church, who revere Nicholas as a martyred saint and champion his official canonization, an issue still being decided by the church.

A church commission examining Nicholas' possible canonization issued a report earlier this year that dismissed the ritual murder myth. But that report was not widely disseminated and it remains virtually unknown in Russia.

The version of the czar's death that became widely accepted by Russian monarchists and others was that of White Army investigator Nikolai Sokolov, who said that the royal family's bodies were destroyed and could not be found and that he had discovered kabalistic "signs" in the room where the royal family was shot.

According to Sokolov, who inspected the site soon after the regicide took place, a quotation from Heinrich Heine, the German poet of Jewish background, was found on the wall in the room where the family was killed: "On this very night Balthazar was killed by his serfs."

Another document in Sokolov's files referred to other marks on the walls and windowsills. Interpretations of these marks as secret "kabalistic signs" were published in one monarchist publication after another outside the country during the Soviet period until they reached the books published now in Russia by ultranationalists.

The fact that many of the early Bolsheviks were of Jewish origin — including Yakov Yurovsky, the head of the firing squad that shot the royal family, and Yakov Sverdlov, an early Soviet leader who reported the executions to Lenin — has long been fertile soil for anti-Semitic speculation among nationalists and far-right monarchists.

Even people who do not fit those categories seem persuaded by the ritual murder question posed by the church.

Nadia, a nurse in her early 30s, said in an interview outside the St. Nicholas Orthodox Church in downtown Moscow that she did not know much about most of the questions submitted by the church to the government commission. But regarding the ritual murder question, she said that if the church put it on the list, "This must be true. Of course not today, but probably in the past Jews were doing this." □

Nine voted to Jewish sports hall

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — Nine people from five countries have been elected to the International Jewish Sports Hall of Fame.

The 1998 honorees include four Americans: Marv Levy, who coached the National Football League's Buffalo Bills to four consecutive Super Bowls (1990-93); David Stern, commissioner of the National Basketball Association since 1984; Cpl. "Izzy" Schwartz, world flyweight boxing champion from 1927-29; and A.J. Liebling, celebrated author and the New Yorker's magazine boxing writer from the 1930s to the 1950s.

Also elected were Russia's Vera Krepinka, winner of the 1960 Olympic long-jump gold medal; Okey Geffen, South Africa's famed international rugby kicker; Istvan Barta, the goalie of Hungary's Olympic championship water polo teams in the 1920s; Chagai Zamir, Israel's handicapped volleyball star and the winner of nine Paralympics, World Cup and European Cup gold medals; and Gyorgy Szepesi-Friedlander, a Hungarian broadcasting icon.

The International Jewish Sports Hall of Fame is located in Netanya, Israel, on the campus of the Wingate Institute. □

Orthodox criticize Israeli official for talking to Reform Jewish group*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The key Israeli trying to resolve the religious pluralism controversy has come under Orthodox criticism for addressing a conference of the Reform movement in Israel.

Finance Minister Ya'acov Ne'eman told the Nov. 27 opening session of the annual convention of the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism that the current conflict between the different streams of Judaism would be resolved "not through the courts or legislation in the Knesset, but through understanding."

Ne'eman, who heads a committee charged with finding a compromise to the religious pluralism controversy in Israel, said that all disputes between the various streams should be resolved according to halachah, or Jewish law.

Addressing the conference as "dear brothers," Ne'eman described the Reform movement's educational institutions as a "splendid educational achievement" and praised the Israeli branch of the movement for not having adopted some of the customs of its American counterpart.

In the past, Ne'eman has criticized American Reform Jewry's willingness to accept gay marriages and to have its rabbis officiate at intermarriages.

He appealed to the convention to adhere to halachah as the standard for resolving religious issues, saying that otherwise, "Our children won't be able to marry your children and we will sow division and create separate communities."

Ne'eman's participation in the conference drew sharp criticism from fervently Orthodox circles.

Knesset member Moshe Gafni of United Torah Judaism, terming Ne'eman's remarks a "desecration of God's name," called on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to dismiss Ne'eman from the Cabinet.

Deputy Housing Minister Meir Porush, also of United Torah Judaism, termed Ne'eman's appeal for unity a "slap in the face" to fervently Orthodox Jews.

Along with Ne'eman, Jewish Agency for Israel Chairman Avraham Burg, Labor Knesset member Uzi Baram and Meretz Party leader Yossi Sarid addressed the Reform convention. Other Labor and Likud legislators who initially said they would attend did not show up. □

Farrakhan wants to visit Israel

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The leader of the Nation of Islam wants to advance the Middle East peace process.

The Rev. Louis Farrakhan, who has often sparked controversy with his anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist rhetoric, announced Sunday during an interview on CNN that he hoped to visit Israel during an upcoming 52-nation tour that is scheduled to include Syria, Iraq, Libya and Cuba.

"I want to be a voice for peace," he told CNN. "I don't think that the politicians of the region are doing their utmost for peace."

Farrakhan, who was slated to leave on the tour this week, ducked a question whether he would call on Hamas and Islamic Jihad to suspend terror attacks on Israel.

"I would also advise the Israelis to stop building Jewish settlements in Jerusalem," he said, adding when the question was again put to him, "Hamas leaders have already said that they're ready to exchange violence for a dialogue toward peace."

Farrakhan said that he was not sure Israel would be willing to host him.

"My image there is terrible," he said.

Israeli officials said Monday they had no plans to invite him for a visit. □

Polish church declares Jan. 17 to be annual "Day of Judaism"*By Ruth E. Gruber*

ROME (JTA) — The Polish Catholic Church has designated Jan. 17 as an annual "Day of Judaism" in Polish churches.

The day will be dedicated to interfaith dialogue and to teaching Polish Catholics about Judaism.

The initiative, slated to involve all Roman Catholic dioceses in the country, follows the example of the Italian Catholic Church, which declared Jan. 17 an annual Day of Judaism in Italy several years ago.

Stanislaw Krajewski, Warsaw consultant for the American Jewish Committee and a Polish Jewish leader long active in interfaith relations, praised the church's initiative.

"I believe that this is a remarkable project," Krajewski said in an interview from Warsaw. The Day of Judaism initiative has the "potential to affect masses" of people.

A special insert was added to a church brochure for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity — which is slated for Jan. 18-25 — in order to inform Polish Catholic priests and parishes about the new initiative.

Some 7,000 copies of the brochure will be sent to all Roman Catholic churches in Poland.

Under the slogan "Whoever Meets Jesus Christ Meets Judaism," which was taken from a quotation by Polish-born Pope John Paul II, the insert includes an introduction by Bishop Stanislaw Gadecki, who heads the Polish church's commission on Catholic-Jewish dialogue.

The Day of Judaism, Gadecki wrote, "presents no attempt to proselytize among Jews, and no attempt to judaize Christianity." Instead, he said it was meant to promote mutual respect, cooperation and "joint testimony for justice and human dignity."

The insert proposes special Bible readings for church services that day and suggested a theme for a sermon that would include various quotations from John Paul II on Jewish-Catholic relations.

These included the words the pope addressed to Jews when he met with Rome Chief Rabbi Elio Toaff in 1986 — "You are our beloved brothers, our elder brothers" — as well as more recent papal statements, such as "Anti-Semitism has no justification, and must be condemned."

The suggested sermon concludes with the statement that the Jewish people are loved by God. □

Israel extends teen's detention

JERUSALEM (JTA) — An Israeli court has extended the detention of a Maryland teen-ager charged with murder.

During the next two weeks, the Justice Ministry is slated to decide whether to honor a formal extradition request for Samuel Sheinbein submitted last month by American officials. Sheinbein, 17, fled to Israel in September, shortly after the body of 19-year-old Alfred Tello was found in a Maryland suburb.

Maryland police suspect that Sheinbein and another suspect killed Tello and dismembered his body with a saw.

Sheinbein hoped to escape trial in the United States by claiming Israeli citizenship through his father, who was born here and left in 1950.

Under Israeli law, a citizen cannot be extradited for a crime committed in another country.

But after pressure from the United States, Attorney General Elyakim Rubinstein recently stated that the citizenship law does not apply to Sheinbein. □