



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ A former Vichy official on trial for crimes against humanity admitted in court that he signed an order deporting a French Jew during World War II. Maurice Papon, who had earlier denied he signed the order, is charged with deporting 1,560 Jews, 223 of them children, while he was an official in the Bordeaux region during the war.

■ Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Israel "would not act quickly and hastily" in deciding how much land in the West Bank it is willing to cede to the Palestinians. U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright has pressured the Israeli leader to come up with a specific proposal for a West Bank redeployment before the two meet next week in Europe.

■ The Vatican denied again that it stored gold and money for Croatian fascists after the end of World War II. The Vatican also reiterated its refusal to open its archives about the period.

■ The U.N. General Assembly was scheduled to vote on a proposal that would give the Palestinians member-state status without allowing the right to vote. Israel, the United States, the European Union and Russia oppose the proposal.

■ Israel beefed up its security in eastern Jerusalem to prevent the Palestinian Authority from carrying out a census there. Under the terms of the Oslo accords, the Palestinians are not allowed to take a census in the eastern half of the capital. [Page 4]

■ Jewish and human rights activists in Latvia are questioning the sincerity of their government's decision to halt further distribution of a controversial history book. They charge that the book, which contains statements that insult the Baltic nation's minorities, including Jews, remains in some Latvian schools.

■ The Salute to Israel Parade in New York will be held jointly next year with a march honoring Martin Luther King Jr. The decision was made because of a scheduling conflict. [Page 4]

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Jewish officials, Switzerland discuss comprehensive solution

By Mitchell Danow

NEW YORK (JTA) — A decision to postpone American sanctions on Swiss banks has one clear goal.

The delay until March 31 will give Jewish officials a chance to negotiate a final settlement of all Holocaust-era claims against the banks, according to an official involved in the negotiations.

The so-called global settlement could involve a payment of billions of dollars in order to bring closure to the entire range of issues related to Switzerland's wartime activities, World Jewish Congress President Edgar Bronfman said last week in London during an international conference on Nazi-looted gold.

He added that the Swiss banks owed as much as \$2 billion to \$3 billion to survivors and their heirs.

WJC Secretary-General Israel Singer, who traveled to Switzerland after the conference, would not discuss the nature of his talks with Swiss officials.

But a source familiar with the situation confirmed that there indeed had been discussions on a final settlement to satisfy the demands of all Jewish claimants, including dormant account holders and, perhaps, those participating in a class-action lawsuit against the Swiss banks.

"Swiss bankers didn't know what to do" when confronted with a seemingly endless succession of claims, the source said, adding that the banks had initiated feelers in recent months about reaching a comprehensive settlement.

The source added that there was a "50-50 chance whether the settlement would occur by March 31, 1998."

At a conference Monday in New York, public finance officials from across the United States agreed to wait until that date before imposing further sanctions against Swiss banks for what they view as foot-dragging in paying off Holocaust victims' claims.

California, Massachusetts and New York are the three states that had already imposed sanctions.

But California State Treasurer Matt Fong announced at the conference that he was lifting them.

New York City Comptroller Alan Hevesi, who hosted the conference, spoke against an immediate imposition of sanctions — a stance likewise adopted by U.S. Senate Banking Committee Chairman Alfonse D'Amato (R-N.Y.), who has been one of Switzerland's harshest critics.

'Straining at the bit'

The state and municipal officials gathered at The Plaza Hotel gave their informal approval to a moratorium, but some did so grudgingly.

Burton Netarus, a member of the Chicago City Council, said in an interview that he was "straining at the bit" to take action against the Swiss banks.

But he added that he would observe the moratorium before submitting a resolution that Chicago cease depositing any city funds with Swiss banks.

At least one conference attendee said he would not wait until March 31 passed.

Joel Weingarten, a New Jersey Republican assemblyman, said in an interview that he would press ahead with plans to co-sponsor a bill to prohibit the state from investing funds with Swiss financial institutions.

Some of the approximately 50 Holocaust survivors attending the conference were clearly dissatisfied with the moratorium.

Alice Fischer, a survivor of the Bergen-Belsen camp, was outraged that the Swiss had served as the Nazis' bankers and urged immediate action against them.

Estelle Sapir, who fled a Nazi death camp as a teen-ager, spoke out against the WJC for encouraging the moratorium and charged that the Jewish "organizations are just looking out for themselves."

Among the conference speakers was Ambassador Thomas Borer, who has served as Switzerland's leading trouble-shooter on Holocaust issues. No

other country has "taken comparable measures" to examine its history, he said.

Borer added that the threatened sanctions are "unfair and are coming at a time when we are achieving tangible results."

Noting that "punitive threats have created an anti-American posture in Switzerland," he also hinted that American sanctions against the Swiss could bring a swift retaliation.

Switzerland ranks among the seven top investors in the United States and more than 500 U.S. companies have a presence in his country, Borer said.

The conference took place on the same day that two of Switzerland's largest banks, Swiss Bank Corporation and Union Bank of Switzerland, announced their planned merger.

Officials from the two banks pledged at the conference that the merger would not impede efforts to locate dormant accounts or to probe possible questionable bank dealings with the Nazis.

Observers believed that the merger might help the ongoing probes since UBS head Robert Struder was being forced into early retirement as a part of the merger.

Struder has in the past referred to dormant Holocaust-era assets in Swiss banks as "peanuts."

Paul Volcker, the head of a commission probing dormant accounts in Swiss banks, said the commission would likely start processing payments to some holders of dormant accounts soon after it holds a meeting next week in Zurich.

The Swiss Bankers Association announced just prior to the conference that it made some payments on dormant account claims.

The association did not disclose the amounts or recipients.

Michael Bradfield, an official with the Volcker Commission, told reporters Monday that those payments were not made under the commission's oversight.

He criticized those early payments, saying it was "not consistent with our understanding of the claims settlement" process.

Borer defended the move, saying that only disputed claims would be submitted to the commission. □

Holland plans to aid Dutch Jews with its share of Nazi-looted gold

By Elise Friedmann

AMSTERDAM (JTA) — Holland wants to use its \$10 million share of an international gold pool to help its own Jewish community.

"Part of this gold was stolen from the Jews in our country," said Joop van Kemenade, chairman of the Dutch government committee investigating restitution of Jewish property.

He was explaining why Holland doesn't want to contribute the funds to a newly created international fund for Holocaust survivors.

The United States and Britain launched the international fund at last week's Nazi gold conference in London that was held under the auspices of the Tripartite Gold Commission.

The conference was geared in part to determine how 5.6 tons of residual gold, currently worth between \$55 million and \$60 million, should be distributed by the commission, which was set up by the United States, Britain and France after World War II to distribute looted Nazi gold back to its rightful owners.

U.S. Undersecretary of State for Economic Affairs Stuart Eizenstat, the Clinton administration's point man on the Nazi gold issue, has offered the Dutch the option of

spending \$10 million from the new fund on projects for Dutch survivors, provided that Holland agrees to participate in the fund.

Nine countries have so far committed more than \$15 million to the fund.

The United States pledged \$4 million, rising to \$25 million if Congress approves.

And Britain said it would contribute \$1.7 million to the fund.

Luxembourg, Croatia, Greece, Poland and Austria — which all have claims to the Tripartite gold — said they were ready to transfer part or all of their claims to the new fund.

Brazil and Argentina also said they plan to make donations.

France, like Holland, has indicated that it would not contribute its share to the fund — some \$21 million — but instead give it to its own Jewish population.

Whether the United States, Britain and France will agree to the Dutch plan is uncertain, but Dutch Jewry is already debating how to distribute the funds.

A Dutch Jewish umbrella organization wants to set up a fund for projects aimed at caring for Holocaust survivors and ensuring Jewish continuity.

Part of the fund would be used to help individuals with restitution claims against banks and insurance companies. □

Israeli envoy visits Swiss village that gave sanctuary from Nazis

By Fredy Rom

ZURICH (JTA) — For many, Switzerland's behavior during the war has become synonymous with laundering Nazi gold and hoarding dormant bank accounts.

But wartime Switzerland means something different to Israel's new ambassador to the Alpine nation.

Yitzhak Mayer was a 9-year-old fugitive from occupied France when he arrived in the Swiss town of Eglisau with his mother and brother in 1943.

"When we saw the Swiss soldier, my mother first believed we were in German-occupied territories," Mayer said Sunday during a visit to Eglisau.

"I took over the talking. I told the Swiss that my mother was sick and that she needed a hospital, but in reality my mother was only pregnant. But a doctor understood this message and let us live," Mayer said.

"It was this unknown doctor who saved our lives," he said.

"Now I am a father and grandfather."

Mayer's daughter Esther and two grandchildren came from Canada for the ceremony in Eglisau, which was attended by some 200 political leaders, diplomats and representatives of Swiss Jewish communities.

Switzerland provided haven to 25,000 Jewish refugees during the war, who survived the war along with the country's 20,000 Jewish citizens. About 30,000 were turned away.

Mayer mentioned both groups, saying he represented the people who found refuge in Switzerland.

But he added, "I am also the ambassador of those you refused entry."

In a speech, Mayer praised Switzerland for its recent moves to investigate its behavior during World War II. He also called for cooperation between Israel and Switzerland on a Holocaust education program.

Emotions reached their highest level when the ambassador sang songs with his former classmates in the school they attended together more than half a century ago.

"It is here, in this village, that I learned what love and kindness are," Mayer said. □

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Reform draws line in sand amid ongoing conversion talks

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK (JTA) — The Reform movement is drawing its line in the sand: It has issued a seven-page statement outlining what it is willing to accept from negotiations with the Orthodox on religious pluralism in Israel.

The report makes clear for the first time the movement's bottom line — a solution based on a cooperative conversion program developed by rabbis from all three major streams in Denver two decades ago.

The Reform movement is also insisting that any conversion solution be accompanied by one that legally recognizes the right of its rabbis to officiate at weddings in Israel — in the presence of Orthodox witnesses.

The Reform document — signed by the lay and professional heads of the movement's congregational, Zionist and seminary arms — comes in advance of the Jan. 31 deadline set for Israel's Ne'eman Committee.

The committee includes representatives of each of the movements and is attempting to craft a compromise acceptable to all on matters of religious supervision over conversions and marriages. But as the deadline rapidly approaches, neither Reform nor Orthodox leaders are optimistic that a solution can be found. Indeed, Agudath Israel of America, the leading organization representing the interests of the fervently Orthodox, has announced a \$2 million advertising campaign to counter Reform and Conservative efforts to attain official recognition in Israel.

For its part, the Conservative movement plans to issue its own report on the issue shortly.

Frustration with conversion negotiations

The Reform document, "Report to the Reform Movement: Chronicle of a Crisis," expresses intense frustration with the conversion negotiations.

Among the key positions of the report, which was distributed last week to the 875 synagogues that belong to the Reform movement's Union of American Hebrew Congregations:

- If the Chief Rabbinate and Orthodox authorities in Israel are unwilling to accept a conversion solution similar to the Denver program, then the Reform movement will "strongly urge" an administrative solution to the issue of conversions, such as deleting the category of "nationality" from the identity cards that Israeli citizens must carry.

- Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu should publicly withdraw his commitment to support conversion legislation, which, if passed, would codify into law Orthodox control over conversions.

- Leaders of Reform temples should stay in close contact with local Jewish federation leaders to "ensure that they're not co-opted by the Israeli government to endorse a proffered compromise if that 'compromise' is unacceptable to the Reform and/or Conservative movements."

According to the document, federation leaders have been pressuring Reform representatives to stick with the negotiations as long as it takes to come up with a solution, a concept that the movement rejects.

- Federation leaders should be urged to implement the supplemental United Jewish Appeal fund-raising campaign to help raise an additional \$10 million for the three religious movements in Israel.

The Reform movement issued the paper now, said Rabbi Eric Yoffie, the UAHC's president, because Reform movement leaders are worried that if they do not set the record straight, they might be blamed for the committee's failure to produce a workable solution.

"This is an effort to make clear the principles that guide us in these negotiations. We want to clear up what's really happening and what's at stake here," he said.

Bobby Brown, Netanyahu's adviser on Diaspora affairs, reacted to the document saying, "If all sides would use their energy to help find a solution we could live with, it would be better than people looking for tactical ways not to be blamed."

Brown said the negotiating committee chairman, Finance Minister Ya'acov Ne'eman, has been trying to convince the Orthodox establishment to accept the Denver model.

Ne'eman has held meetings with more than 130 Orthodox religious and political leaders during the past few weeks, said Brown, who was visiting New York this week.

The Reform movement would also accept a proposal that would allow Reform rabbis to perform weddings permitted by Jewish law — which would exclude those between two people of the same gender or between a Jew and a non-Jew — as long as two witnesses approved by Israel's Orthodox rabbinate were present.

Yoffie himself has doubts about the likelihood of reaching a compromise.

"The chief rabbi has ultimate authority over the conversion process, so it's very significant when he refers to the Reform movement as 'clowns,'" Yoffie said, referring to a recent statement made by Sephardi Chief Rabbi Eliyahu Bakshi-Doron.

"They can't continue to use that kind of language and at the same time suggest a cooperative effort," he said.

What's more, Yoffie said, some within the Reform movement are not interested in a Denver-based model, which ultimately cedes all authority over conversions to the Orthodox rabbis who oversee the final steps in the process.

It's rare for Orthodox leaders to agree with Yoffie on much, but they do agree with his pessimism about the outcome of negotiations.

The program 'simply cannot work'

"The Denver program simply cannot work because any Reform candidate can't be expected to be too observant, and there can be no recognition of conversions without Shabbat, kashrut and the basic elements of Judaism," said Rabbi Moshe Sherer, president of Agudath Israel.

It is also "disingenuous" for the Reform movement to advocate for such a solution, Sherer said, "since their long-range plans call for absolute equality."

Dr. Mandell Ganchrow, president of the Orthodox Union, which represents centrist Orthodoxy, questioned what sort of compromises the Reform movement is willing to make to permit the Denver program to work, since the Orthodox would view their own participation as an enormous compromise.

"I would like to see them say, for the sake of Jewish unity, that they're going to do away with patrilineal descent because the Conservative and Orthodox movements and Torah cannot accept it, and that they're not going to allow their rabbis to perform intermarriages," he said.

That would be a "forward step on their part," Ganchrow said, referring to the Reform policy of recognizing as Jewish children born to a non-Jewish mother and Jewish father, as long as they are raised as Jews.

Yoffie said the Reform movement has already "compromised significantly" by even considering a plan under which Reform rabbis would have no true authority.

He said the goal of the negotiations should be finding a narrow, administrative solution to the problem, rather than an ideological compromise.

"The issue now," asked Yoffie, "is what are we going to come up with?" □

New York Israel parade joins tribute to Martin Luther King

By Adam Dickter

New York Jewish Week

NEW YORK (JTA) — Next year's Salute to Israel Parade will do more than honor the first 50 years of the Jewish state. It will reflect American history as well.

For the first time in 33 years, those marching down Fifth Avenue on May 17 will include both Jews and African Americans as they combine support for Israel with commemoration of the life of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

In an arrangement that will evoke memories of blacks and Jews marching side by side for civil rights, the Israel Tribute Committee and the 369th Regiment Veterans Association have agreed to combine two marches planned for the same day. The 369th Regiment was a segregated unit that distinguished itself in the two world wars.

"I don't think there's been a situation like this where Jews and blacks have marched together [since] 1963 in Washington," said William Helmreich, president of the Israel Tribute Committee, which took over responsibility for the parade last year from the now-defunct American Zionist Youth Foundation.

Reflecting on a scheduling conflict that quickly turned amiable, Helmreich said the story was a welcome change of pace from recent black-Jewish tensions.

"When we march together publicly up Fifth Avenue, it may send the message that not everything has to be solved through conflict. I think it's a very important civics lesson," he said.

The arrangement reached last month on the joint parade was brokered by the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York.

The discussions began when the Jewish group sought a permit on May 17 and found that the black group had already reserved the date.

There are few Sundays that would be available for an Israel parade before summer vacation.

"We thought maybe we can persuade the [369th] to take another day," said Helmreich, a sociology professor at City College. "But they said they had given up their date a few years ago and, for their own reasons, preferred to stay on this date."

'It just takes some common sense'

In what he called a "fortuitous development," Helmreich learned that Francis Terrell, his co-director at the Center for Conflict Resolution at City College, had been the grand marshal at last year's King parade.

The two contacted Gen. Nathaniel James, president of the 369th, who readily agreed to a combined parade.

Terrell, a retired general in the U.S. Army Reserves, said solving the problem was a simple matter of bringing the two sides together.

"You can think of a million ways to say no to an idea," he said. "It just takes some common sense and some patience to sit down and think it through to make it a win-win situation for everybody. It shows all the naysayers out there that in the spirit of cooperation and good will, many things can be done."

The Martin Luther King parade is considered a substantially smaller event than the Salute to Israel, although no figures on participation were available.

Last year's Israel parade included 35,000 marchers with 22 floats. This year, as the result of a national outreach effort, that number is expected to increase to 50,000 marchers and 30 floats, according to Ruth Kastner, director of the Israel Tribute Committee.

Terrell said he hoped combining the events would

increase spectator turnout to "at least half a million, maybe more." He also expressed hope that the event would serve to bolster support for Israel in the African American community, as well as deepen black-Jewish ties.

"This is a parade for schoolchildren," he said.

"What better way to teach the spirit of cooperation than to begin with young people?" □

Palestinian Authority launches census of West Bank, Gaza Strip

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The Palestinian Authority's first census has brought the conflict over Jerusalem to the surface.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reacted to the census of West Bank and Gaza Strip residents by reiterating that Israel would not allow the Palestinians to conduct the census in eastern Jerusalem, a move that he said would infringe on Israel's sovereignty over the city.

Israeli security officials were stationed this week in Arab neighborhoods of eastern Jerusalem to block residents from returning the questionnaires to Palestinian Authority officials.

Population figures for the West Bank are unclear. Israel's civil administration, which began overseeing the area after 1967, has acknowledged that figures are not up to date.

The Palestinian census began Tuesday, the 10th anniversary of the start of the intifada, the Palestinian uprising that lasted until the start of the Oslo process in late 1993.

Palestinian officials, who called the census a historic development, denied that they were polling eastern Jerusalem, but said it would be easy to obtain information through other sources.

"I have been contacted by Israeli companies offering to conduct the census for us in eastern Jerusalem," Hassan Abu Libdeh, the director of the census, told Israel Radio.

He accused Israel of trying to politicize the census.

The future of Jerusalem is perhaps the most sensitive issue slated to be discussed in the final-status negotiations.

The Palestinians want the eastern half of the city as the capital of an independent Palestinian state. Israel counters that Jerusalem must remain as its eternal, indivisible capital. □

Israel to destroy terrorist homes

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel's High Court of Justice has cleared the way for the army to demolish or seal the homes of the families of five Hamas suicide bombers.

In its ruling Tuesday, the court rejected a challenge from some of the families regarding the veracity of genetic tests that linked them to the men who carried out two attacks in Jerusalem, killing 21 and wounding some 360.

Two suicide bombers struck in the Mahane Yehuda open-air market on July 30, and three hit the Ben Yehuda pedestrian mall on Sept. 4.

In also rejecting other petitions from the families, who live in villages near the West Bank town of Nablus, the court said that they had provided food and shelter to the terrorists for a prolonged period of time before they carried out the attacks.

The lawyer for the families denied the allegations, saying that if they were true, then the family members should be charged as alleged accomplices and not be subjected to collective punishment without a trial. □