



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ **A federal lawsuit was filed against a Florida school district for a high school Bible course.** The plaintiffs claim the course, which is slated to be offered for the first time in January, teaches the Bible as historical fact. [Page 3]

■ **Israel is reportedly considering redeploying troops from 12 percent of the West Bank.** The United States has been pressuring Israel to devise a plan before Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's scheduled meeting next week with U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. [Page 1]

■ **Top Clinton administration officials sought to reassure American Jewish leaders that the United States is "not dumping on Israel,"** according to one participant in a conference call this week. [Page 1]

■ **The Organization of the Islamic Conference ended its meeting in Iran with a joint declaration condemning terrorism "in all forms" and supporting a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital.** Turkish President Suleyman Demirel walked out of the conference to protest what a Turkish official called "attempts to force Turkey to end its political and military cooperation with Israel."

■ **The United States elected to remain on the sidelines in the dispute between Palestinians and Israelis over a Palestinian census that includes eastern Jerusalem.** A State Department spokesman said both sides should refrain from provocative actions. Meanwhile, Palestinian officials said the census would continue, despite passage of a law in the Israeli Knesset on Wednesday prohibiting it.

■ **The Israeli Knesset passed a motion calling for the release of Jonathan Pollard.** Israel's deputy defense minister was quoted as saying, "I hope that soon Jonathan Pollard will be a visitor to the Knesset."

■ **A Jewish woman is in line to become Switzerland's president.** Interior Minister Ruth Dreifuss will become the country's vice president in January. Under the country's rotating system, Dreifuss is slated to be the Swiss president in 1999.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Officials seek to reassure Jews as Israel ponders further pullback

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Amid stepped-up U.S. pressure on Israel to turn over another sizable portion of the West Bank to the Palestinians, top U.S. diplomats are seeking to reassure a largely anxious American Jewish leadership.

Martin Indyk, U.S. assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, told about a dozen Jewish leaders in a conference call Wednesday that the United States would work with Israel — not around it — in its efforts to move the peace process forward, according to participants in the 40-minute call.

"The administration reached the point of concern that they were walking into a crisis" with the American Jewish community about U.S. pressure on Israel, said Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League.

Echoing the assessment of many who participated in the call, Foxman said the officials were "calming" as they stressed that the United States "is not dumping on Israel."

Indyk was scheduled to meet with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Friday before traveling to Syria to discuss the stalled Syrian-Israeli peace talks.

Dennis Ross, special Middle East coordinator, and top State Department official Wendy Sherman joined Indyk on the call, which participants described as a fact-finding briefing without criticism or praise for U.S. policy. The call came one day before Netanyahu convened his senior ministers to discuss final-status negotiations with the Palestinians and a further redeployment in the territories.

The flurry of activity comes as a prelude to another round of Middle East talks with U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, which are scheduled to take place in Europe next week.

Albright is slated to meet separately with Netanyahu and with Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat. Plans are in the works for a separate Netanyahu-Arafat meeting. The Americans expect Israel to present substantive proposals for a further troop pullback in the West Bank.

Levy calls for substantive proposal

But Cabinet Secretary Danny Naveh told Israel Army Radio on Thursday he doubted that the government would conclude its debate in time for Netanyahu to present Albright with any detailed proposal at their meeting.

"We are speaking of a very serious subject," he said.

However, Foreign Minister David Levy told Israel Radio that the prime minister must come to the meeting with Albright with a substantive proposal or Israel would find itself isolated internationally.

At their meeting in Paris a week ago, Albright told Netanyahu that the United States expected a "credible, meaningful and sizable" proposal from Israel regarding the scope of the further redeployment.

Israeli media reports said Albright was not expected to accept anything less than 12 percent.

Back in the United States, meanwhile, some Jewish officials participating on the conference call with U.S. officials expressed concern that the Clinton administration has placed the burden of moving the peace process forward on Israel without discussing Palestinian compliance with the Oslo accords, especially with regard to a crackdown on terrorism.

In response, Ross told the group that Albright would look for commitments from both parties.

According to participants, Ross said the United States is trying to develop an approach with the Palestinians that meets Israeli concerns and is trying to develop an approach with the Israelis that meets Palestinian concerns. Ross said there has been "measurable improvement" in Palestinian security cooperation with Israel since Albright's visit to the region in September.

Meanwhile, there were signals this week that Albright has made progress in her request for a double-digit redeployment of Israeli troops. The

Palestinians have been demanding at least 30 percent more of the territory. Palestinians already control about 27 percent of the West Bank.

Israeli media reported that Levy, Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai and National Minister of Infrastructure Ariel Sharon have agreed to a map that would allow for a 12 percent redeployment.

The United States publicly rejected an earlier, informal Israeli plan to redeploy from 6 to 8 percent of the West Bank. Defense Ministry officials denied that one of the maps drawn up by Mordechai handed over 13 percent of land.

Before the call, the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations sent a letter to President Clinton, urging that when differences arise between the two countries, they should be "dealt with directly and not in the public arena."

This week's conference call was also noteworthy because it marked the second time in as many months that the Clinton administration put together its own invitation list for a Jewish briefing. The State Department purposely excluded Jewish officials who do not favor the Oslo peace process, sources said. □

(JTA correspondent Naomi Segal in Jerusalem contributed to this report.)

Thanks to Israel's premier, student gets to dad's funeral

*By Lori Silberman Brauner
New Jersey Jewish News*

WHIPPANY, N.J. (JTA) — When a national labor strike shut down Israeli airports last week, an American studying in Israel thought he would not be able to attend his father's funeral in New Jersey.

But help came from an unlikely place: the Prime Minister's Office. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, traveling to France and Germany, offered Zev Slurzberg a seat on his private plane. Slurzberg transferred to the Concorde in Paris in order to make it home in time for the funeral last Friday.

Slurzberg, 18, was aided by Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, who appealed to the Prime Minister's Office for assistance. Riskin is one of the deans of Yeshivat Hamivtar in Efrat, where Slurzberg was studying.

"I thought it was just extremely nice" what the prime minister did, said Slurzberg in an interview. He said Netanyahu came to his seat in the plane's press section and offered his condolences — and also joked to reporters that Slurzberg was given a "trempe," the Hebrew word for a hitchhiked ride. □

Israel offers training course to medics and ambulance drivers

By Susan Jacobs

NEW YORK (JTA) — Israel's emergency rescue service is training Palestinian paramedics and ambulance drivers.

The training program by Magen David Adom comes at a time of high tension between Israel and the Palestinians because of the stalled peace process.

Despite the problems in political negotiations, Magen David Adom President Dr. Shlomi Antebbi agreed to a request from the chairman of the Palestinian Red Crescent, Dr. Fathi Arafat, to train the Palestinians.

"Cooperation between the MDA and the Palestinian Red Crescent will create increased understanding between the two peoples," said Natan Kodinsky, director of training for Magen David Adom.

About 25 Palestinians are participating in the

course. They will join the staff of the Palestinian Red Crescent, which operates in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The course involves training in ambulance driving and equipment and medical treatment, including first aid. The three-week course, which began Nov. 30, is being held at the Holyland Hotel in Jerusalem. A senior Magen David Adom instructor is conducting the program in Arabic. □

Top Russian legislator speaks at ultranationalist convention

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — A recent convention of Russian extremists in St. Petersburg featured a large swastika and a leading member of the country's Parliament.

The two-day event in a hall adorned with a swastika attracted leaders and activists from 20 such groups, including the Liberal Democratic Party of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the neo-Nazi Russian National Unity organization, and a group called the Black Hundreds — a reference to a far-right nationalist movement in Imperial Russia that was responsible for several Jewish pogroms in the early part of the century.

Among those attending the fourth annual convention of Russian ultranationalists was Sergei Baburin, the first deputy speaker of the Duma, Russia's lower house of parliament.

He told the gathering that he would like to head what he termed a "unified national opposition" to the Kremlin. According to Baburin, one of the Duma's most influential members, a "fight for the annihilation of the Russian people" is being waged within Russia. □

Russia pardons Austrian man believed to be Hitler's relative

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — A person believed to be a relative of Adolf Hitler was among a group of German and Austrian citizens recently pardoned by Russia, a Moscow daily newspaper reported.

The 61 Germans and 13 Austrians exonerated last month — most of them posthumously — were convicted as war criminals by Soviet military courts during and after World War II.

Ignaz Koppensteiner was arrested in Germany by Soviet military police in May 1945 and sent to a Moscow prison.

According to the Kommersant Daily, he was charged four years later on the basis of having been a relative of Hitler and that he was therefore guilty of having "approved of [Hitler's] criminal plans against the USSR."

Koppensteiner, who was not accused of any war crimes, died in a Moscow prison in 1949. According to a recently declassified criminal file, Koppensteiner was apparently the husband of one of Hitler's first cousins.

Austria had asked for his posthumous pardon.

During and after World War II, Soviet courts convicted as war criminals more than 200,000 foreign citizens who fought in the Axis armies.

Some of them were involved in the slaughter of Jews in areas of the Soviet Union that had been overrun by the Nazis.

In 1991, Russia passed a law rehabilitating citizens who had been victims of Communist repression. The law was extended to foreigners the following year.

Since then, about 8,000 foreign citizens have been pardoned. Some 2,000 people — among them people found guilty of killing Jews — have been denied pardons. □

Lawsuit contends Bible course indoctrinates American students

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — A lawsuit against a Florida school district for its planned Bible course could have important implications for the nationwide debate about religion's role in public schools.

Seven parents, clergy and other community members — including the president of the local Jewish federation — filed a federal lawsuit this week against the school district of Lee County, Fla. Backed by civil rights groups, the plaintiffs are claiming that a course to be offered in high schools next year teaches the Bible as historical fact and indoctrinates students in Christianity.

The controversy erupted two years ago when the school board first voted to allow a history course covering what they call the Old and New Testaments.

With the elective course scheduled to begin Jan. 21, opponents are seeking an injunction to prevent it. No date has been set for a hearing.

"I object to any scriptures at all being taught in the public schools," said Ken Weiner, president of the Jewish Federation of Lee and Charlotte Counties and the only Jewish plaintiff in the lawsuit.

"There are appropriate places — home, synagogue, churches. This is truly a religious course most appropriate for Sunday school," he said.

"I have no problem with a comparative religion course, but this clearly has a Christian bias to it."

Weiner does not have children attending the local high schools, but said it was important for the Jewish community to be represented in the effort to block the course.

The Greensboro, N.C.-based National Council for Bible Curriculum in Public Schools developed the course.

Its president maintains that the course is currently offered in 22 states and has never been challenged legally.

The issue at hand is much larger than the small community on Florida's West Coast.

Church-state watchdogs say the Christian Coalition has been looking to Lee County as a test case in its nationwide effort to bring religion into the public schools.

The American Center for Law and Justice, a Virginia-based group created by Christian Coalition leader the Rev. Pat Robertson, has offered to defend the school board — three of whose members are said to have close ties to the conservative Christian lobby.

'There's nothing to test'

The center maintains that the Bible course is about history, not proselytizing, and argues that it should not be banned because the Supreme Court has held that the Bible is appropriate for curriculum study.

It also called the lawsuit premature, saying that filing it before the course is actually offered is tantamount to censorship.

"There's nothing to test," Marc Stern, co-director of the American Jewish Congress' legal department, said of the efforts to see if the Bible course can pass legal muster. "It's perfectly clear how you run a good Bible curriculum, and this isn't it."

Courts have held that Bible as literature and comparative religion courses are permissible, but the particular curriculum the Florida school district is modeling its course after comes from a group that has an "evangelical world outlook" and takes the Bible literally, Stern said.

"There are perfectly good curricula around, and if somebody really wanted to put in a Bible-as-literature class, they could have done so without any controversy, as lots of schools have," Stern said.

Meanwhile, the American Civil Liberties Union and People For the American Way, two watchdog groups backing the plaintiffs, see the Lee County dispute as a line in the sand.

"What's at stake in this case is really stopping the agenda of the Christian Coalition and their attack on public schools, freedom of religion and the separation of church and state," said Lisa Versaci, Florida state director of People For the American Way. "This is one battleground in a much bigger war." □

Suspected war criminal ejected a second time from United States

By Jeremy Jones

SYDNEY, Australia (JTA) — A suspected Latvian war criminal has now been ejected twice from the United States.

Three years after he was originally deported, Konrad Kalejs, 84, was stopped this week at Los Angeles International Airport, where he was planning to transfer to a flight to Mexico, according to Australian news reports.

American officials suspected that after arriving in Mexico, Kalejs was planning to try to re-enter the United States at another border crossing.

But Kalejs, who was on a U.S. immigration watch list, was detained at the airport and placed on a flight back to Australia, where he obtained citizenship after World War II.

The Australian government has placed no restrictions on his travel.

Kalejs is alleged to have been a member of the mobile killing squad known as the Arajs Kommando, or Latvian Auxiliary Security Police, that collaborated with the Nazi SS during World War II. He is accused of having participated in the killing of 20,000 Jews in Latvia.

About 75,000 Jews, or more than 90 percent of Latvia's prewar Jewish community, were murdered by the Nazis — with help from local residents.

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

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

He was deported by Canada to Australia in August.

Australian officials have said it is unlikely he would be prosecuted there. Latvian officials recently launched an investigation into Kalejs past, but Jewish officials have accused them of having little desire to bring him to trial.

In a related development, a previously secret memo from the Australian federal police indicated that an investigation of another suspected Latvian war criminal, Karlis Ozols, was dropped for financial reasons, despite the view of investigators that he was probably the most serious war criminal living in Australia.

In March, Australian Attorney General Daryl Williams told Parliament that the investigation into Ozols was dropped due to lack of evidence.

Jewish officials have repeatedly criticized Australia's unwillingness to take steps against alleged war criminals who found haven there.

The Los Angeles-based Simon Wiesenthal Center said last month that it believes 64 suspected Latvian war criminals are living in Australia and called on the Australian government to take action against them.

Of the more than 800 people investigated by the Australian government since 1989 for participation in Nazi war crimes, only three have faced charges. None of the prosecutions have been successful. □

PROFILE
Observant Jew heads to Cairo, eager to serve as U.S. ambassador

By Justyna Pawlak
New Jersey Jewish News

WHIPPANY, N.J. (JTA) — Soon after Daniel Kurtzer arrived at the U.S. Embassy in Israel in 1982 to assume the post of first secretary for political affairs, he met Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin.

Introducing the two, Samuel Lewis, the American ambassador to Israel, said, "This is Daniel Kurtzer, who is not only Jewish, but he is Orthodox and has kept kosher."

"You don't even look Jewish," Begin responded. "You look like a goy."

During his 20 years in the foreign service, Kurtzer, who heads to Cairo this month as America's ambassador to Egypt, has served in Israel, Egypt and Washington and has been at the heart of the peace negotiations since 1989.

In guiding Israelis and Palestinians through their fears, desires and visions for the peace process, Kurtzer says, it is helpful to be Jewish.

When a confluence of forces — including the end of the Cold War, the intifada, the 1987-1993 Palestinian uprising, and the Arab division during the Gulf War — improved the climate for peace in the Middle East in the early 1990s, Kurtzer, now 48, was in Washington, serving as deputy assistant secretary for Near Eastern affairs, with responsibility for the peace process.

It allowed him the ability to influence a subject about which Kurtzer had been passionate since high school.

He first traveled to Israel in 1967, the year he graduated from high school.

Born in Elizabeth, N.J., Kurtzer attended that city's Jewish Educational Center. Kurtzer left Elizabeth to attend Yeshiva University in New York City in 1967.

He joined the foreign service immediately after finishing graduate school at Columbia University in 1976, but a year later took a two-year break to assume the post of dean of Yeshiva College, Y.U.'s undergraduate men's college.

Although he is observant, Kurtzer does not identify as an Orthodox Jew. "Orthodoxy connotes one way of thinking," he says, "but there is a lot of spare room for creative thinking in Judaism."

In 1991, Kurtzer and the other Jewish members of the peace process team — Dennis Ross, now U.S. special Middle East coordinator, and Aaron Miller, deputy special Middle East coordinator, were called "Jewish Arabists."

'Completely fair and even-handed'

This team, often referred to as the "Baker Boys," worked for then-Secretary of State James Baker, who was often accused by the American Jewish community of an anti-Israeli bias.

"They were wrong," Kurtzer says about accusations that he had betrayed Israel.

"It was wrong to personify their opposition to American policy — to cast aspersions about who I am and what I stand for."

Gail Pressberg of Americans for Peace Now calls Kurtzer's approach to the peace process "completely fair and even-handed."

"He spent a lot of time with Israelis and Arabs, writing text, exchanging language," she says. "He has gone out of his way to really understand the culture of both sides."

Kurtzer himself professes fascination with the process of negotiation.

"Diplomacy, the resolution of disputes via negotiations rather than force, is of great interest to me," he says.

But he also is criticized for this fascination with the process. "Kurtzer is so deeply involved with the process that he lost sight of the larger picture," says another observer of the American involvement in the Middle East, requesting anonymity.

"He sees the trees and not the forest. For example, he does not think about the fact that maybe the Arabs have not reconciled with Israel's existence."

The same observer, who once worked with Kurtzer in the State Department, called his appointment as ambassador to Egypt idiotic.

"He is an Orthodox Jew. He is very ostentatious about his Orthodoxy. It's like sending a woman to Iraq," he says.

If not ostentatious, Kurtzer has certainly been open about his observance.

"I don't go to routine meetings" on Shabbat, he says, but added that diplomacy occasionally necessitates compromising his religious observance. "Things happen on Shabbat."

Kosher food was scarce when Kurtzer first served as the U.S. Embassy's second secretary for political affairs in Cairo between 1979 and 1982. "I would carry chickens from Israel," he says.

In those years, Kurtzer and his wife posted a note in a Jerusalem butcher shop window asking anyone traveling to Egypt to bring kosher chickens to the embassy.

Kurtzer recalls a similar note posted in a Jerusalem store that sold Judaica. Complete strangers arrived at his doorstep in Cairo with frozen kosher chickens.

But when Kurtzer travels to Cairo next month, the American ambassador's residence will be kosher. Kurtzer sought advice on this matter from Undersecretary of State for Economic Affairs Stuart Eizenstat, who, when he was U.S. ambassador to the European Union, maintained a kosher residence in Brussels.

"The embassy staff, both American and Egyptian, have gone out of their way to be helpful," says Kurtzer, noting he doesn't consider it a political statement that official receptions at the ambassador's residence in Cairo will be kosher.

Relishing the opportunity

When he moves to Egypt in the coming weeks, Kurtzer will face another type of animosity. Although he values his acceptance by the Egyptian authorities as a sign of normalization there, opposition does exist in Egypt.

"Egyptian intellectual circles express concern that as a Jew he is openly concerned for Israel," says Jason Isaacson, director of government and international affairs at the American Jewish Committee.

The Nov. 27 issue of the Jerusalem Report includes an example of the problem.

Columnist Ehud Ya'ari refers to a signed article by Sami Rajab, chief editor of President Hosni Mubarak's National Democratic Party newspaper, Mayo, in which he wrote, "I, like millions of Egyptians, can't bear anything Jewish."

Asked last week about that quote, Kurtzer says, "The history of Egyptian-Israeli relations has been a troubled one."

"Nobody has ever given a signal of going back, but that has not been paralleled by the kind of reconciliation that Begin and Sadat anticipated," he says. "It's our role to help them get there."

Still, Kurtzer relishes the opportunity to serve in Cairo.

"Egypt is of critical importance to the United States and every country in the Middle East," he says. "As a senior American diplomat, it's a treat to be serving there." □