



## NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ The 33rd Zionist Congress ended in Jerusalem with a resolution supporting a committee working to devise a solution to the issue of religious pluralism in Israel. The resolution also calls on Israel to take into account the views of Diaspora Jewry when any changes to Jewish-status issues are considered. Some of the Orthodox delegations voted against the resolution.

■ French extremist leader Jean-Marie Le Pen was convicted of publicly questioning crimes against humanity. Le Pen was ordered to pay thousands of dollars in damages to civil rights groups as well as \$50,000 to publish the court decision in French newspapers and magazines for saying that Nazi gas chambers were a "detail in history."

■ The Hamas co-founder released recently by Israel called for a continuation of the holy war against Israel and for Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat to cut his ties with the Jewish state. Sheik Ahmed Yassin made his comments at a rally in the Gaza Strip marking the 10th anniversary of Hamas.

■ Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu held talks with coalition members in a bid to secure their support for the 1998 budget. Facing a Dec. 31 deadline, some members have threatened to oppose the budget if demands for social spending are not met. [Page 4]

■ Cooperation between Israeli and German security services led to the arrest in Israel of a German citizen suspected of planning a terror attack on behalf of Hezbollah. Stefan Josef Smyrek, a 26-year-old convert to Islam, was arrested at the end of November. [Page 2]

■ Israel's national airline projects net losses of up to \$10 million in 1998. The projected deficit is down from \$84 million in 1996.

## NEWS ANALYSIS

### Europe ratchets up the pressure on Israel, playing role of 'bad cop'

By Douglas Davis

LONDON (JTA) — Europe and Israel appear to be on a collision course as the old year fades and Britain prepares to assume the presidency of the European Union on Jan. 1.

Signs of impending danger for Israel appeared earlier this month with the publication of the Luxembourg Declaration, a wide-ranging document that outlined the worldview of the European heads of government and singled out Israel in an 18-point statement on the Middle East peace process.

The danger increased when Britain proclaimed that the flagging Middle East peace process would top its agenda during the six-month period of its presidency.

The latest developments raise the question: Why has the European Union in general — and Britain in particular — chosen this moment to ignore Israel's demand for reciprocity as the basis for making progress with the Palestinians?

Why deliver a public humiliation and antagonize Israel at this point in the peace process?

According to some analysts, the Europeans are firing American bullets at a time when the Clinton administration wants to see the heat turned up on Israel.

The European leaders pronounced themselves "deeply concerned by the lack of progress" in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. Pointing an accusing finger at Israel, their declaration pledged the 15-nation European Union to:

- Enhance its support to Palestinian institutions in eastern Jerusalem;
- Continue to monitor developments on human rights, Jerusalem and settlements; and
- Offer "specific suggestions" on final-status issues, such as "possible Palestinian statehood, borders/security arrangements, settlements, refugees, Jerusalem and water issues."

It stressed the great urgency for the parties to live up to previous commitments, "especially as regards credible and serious redeployments."

And, in another not-so-subtle dig at Israel, it emphasized the importance of avoiding "counterproductive unilateral actions, for instance on settlements and Jerusalem."

The European Union, it added, would "use all its political and moral weight to ensure that all the provisions in the agreements already reached are fully implemented." Israel hit back, accusing the European Union of adopting a meddling, one-sided approach that disqualified it from playing a constructive role in the peace process.

### Britain ups the ante

Using unusually tough and undiplomatic language, the Israeli Foreign Ministry issued a statement saying it viewed the declaration "with the utmost gravity" and charged that it was "notable for its lack of balance."

"This declaration was adopted at a time when Israel is in the midst of crucial deliberations toward the adoption of decisions of critical importance for the continuation of the peace process," said the statement.

The statement said the Luxembourg Declaration was markedly different from "the constructive and objective approach of the United States," adding that by issuing the declaration, "Europe disqualifies itself from playing a positive role in the process."

The British government soon upped the ante by threatening economic reprisals. A senior British government official, noting the European potential for applying "economic leverage," said Britain would "ensure that the European Union has political influence on the peace process which reflects our economic weight in the region."

Threatening to pressure the parties to get the peace process back on track, the official said, "I would caution any country not to deny the European Union a role."

The theme was picked up by British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook when he met Yasser Arafat in London recently after the Palestinian Authority leader's meeting with U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. Describing

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his meeting with Arafat as "a very good, honest and open exchange of views," Cook assailed Israel, expressing impatience that "so much difficulty had been created by unilateral gestures on the part of one side to the talks."

"We are very anxious to see restraint on future settlement developments and progress on a realistic further redeployment of Israeli troops," he said.

By going on the assault, Europe is saying things that Washington feels constrained from saying publicly. Its leaders are increasing Israel's isolation in order to ratchet up the pressure on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to make him amenable to more subtle pressure when he meets with President Clinton in Washington next month.

Washington is also increasingly anxious about its eroding image in the Arab world and must be hoping that an overtly tough line with Israel, albeit via proxies, may result in greater Israeli flexibility — and this, in turn, will restore some of Washington's lost credibility.

Recent weeks have provided the Clinton administration with much food for thought:

- It expended considerable diplomatic prestige on last month's Middle East and North Africa economic conference in the Persian Gulf state of Qatar — a meeting many considered a failure;

- Washington was unable to muster an Arab coalition for another bout of hostilities with Iraq's Saddam Hussein;

- It has witnessed a growing rapprochement between some Arab states with Iran; and

- Not least, Washington is concerned about the burgeoning influence of Moscow, which brokered the deal that defused the recent Iraqi crisis and permitted U.N. weapons inspectors to return to Baghdad.

Russia is also continuing to supply assistance for Iran's nuclear program, rebuild the Syrian military and score valuable points at American expense in the Arab world while picking up the old Soviet allies in the region.

Britain alone has closely supported Washington's lead on most Middle East issues, particularly Iraq and the peace process, and officials in London insist that while they seek a political role for the European Union in the peace process, their activities will complement — not compete with — Washington's efforts.

In the evolving new power play, it is increasingly obvious that Britain is playing bad cop to Washington's good cop. But this is a high-risk game for Washington.

It may win short-term points by pressuring Israel.

But in the long term, it could lose the respect of an Arab world that will be profoundly unimpressed by its perception that the United States is prepared to go to the mat with its closest and most loyal regional ally.

It is also a dangerous game for Israel.

When the anger in Jerusalem is replaced by a cool, rational assessment, Netanyahu will not find it easy to simply dismiss the views of the European Union — which does, after all, constitute Israel's largest export market. □

## Israel charges German visitor with plotting terrorist attack

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel has charged a German citizen with planning to carry out a terrorist attack.

Stefan Josef Smyrek, 26, was charged last week in a Tel Aviv court with conspiring with an enemy, belonging to a terrorist group and attempting to harm state security.

He also planned to attack Israeli diplomats in Bonn, according to the German weekly Focus.

Smyrek, whose arrest came after close cooperation between Israeli and German security services, was detained at Israel's Ben-Gurion Airport last month.

Details of his arrest were only released last week. According to reports, Smyrek became involved with a Muslim woman in 1994 and later converted to Islam. This summer, he visited Lebanon, where he was recruited by Hezbollah and received training in the use of light weapons and explosives.

In November, he was sent to Germany to obtain a new passport that would not show his previous visit to Lebanon so that he could travel to Israel.

Smyrek was also instructed to gather information and film sites for a possible terrorist attack in Israel.

When he was arrested, he was carrying \$4,000, a video camera, film and a map of Israel. Smyrek told investigators that if released he would try to carry out his orders. Hezbollah has denied sending Smyrek to carry out an attack.

The Israeli daily Ha'aretz reported that Israeli intelligence sources, acting on information from a reliable Hezbollah source, learned of Smyrek's plans several months ago and alerted German intelligence to follow his movements. German sources were quoted by Ha'aretz as saying that since Israel was barred by law from acting on German soil, German security services trailed Smyrek.

According to the sources, Smyrek's purchase of an El Al airplane ticket to Israel from Amsterdam raised suspicions that he might try to blow up the plane. Dutch police were informed of the concerns and detained Smyrek at the airport.

However, when no explosives were found on him, he was released. Having missed the El Al flight, Smyrek was said to have phoned his handlers, who told him to board the next available flight to Israel.

Smyrek was arrested Nov. 28 after arriving in Israel.

Smyrek's mother, in an interview with a German tabloid, said her son was a victim of brainwashing. She said he had suddenly decided to convert to Islam and told her that it was better if she did not know his plans. □

## Israel rejects Arafat's proposal for international observer force

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel has rejected a Palestinian proposal to place international observers in areas of the West Bank that Israel considers essential to its security.

Palestinian officials said the proposal was part of a comprehensive plan Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat planned to raise in discussions in Washington next month with President Clinton.

Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said the plan was intended to rescue the peace process from crisis and expressed the Palestinian Authority's "acceptance of international observers in its territories."

The Palestinian proposal comes as senior Israeli ministers have been debating which West Bank lands to retain in a final-status accord in order to satisfy Israeli security concerns.

David Bar-Illan, a senior aide to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, was quoted as describing the Palestinian proposition for an international observer force as an old idea that is as unacceptable today as it was 10 years ago.

Both Arafat and Netanyahu are due to meet separately with Clinton in Washington next month.

Israeli media reported that the Israeli and Palestinian leaders might also attend a joint meeting next month with U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright in Washington or Europe aimed at drawing up a package deal for advancing the faltering peace talks. □

## BEHIND THE HEADLINES

**Macedonian president fulfills 'obligation' to country's Jews**

By Michael J. Jordan

SKOPJE, Macedonia (JTA) — A president. A doctor. And a developer.

The non-Jewish trio — which includes Macedonian President Kiro Gligorov — is striving to fulfill the country's "moral obligation" to commemorate the approximately 7,300 Jews from this small Balkan nation who perished in Treblinka.

On March 11, 1943, Bulgarian fascists occupying Macedonia rounded up its Jews and delivered them by train to Nazis awaiting next door in Serbia.

Two memorials to the victims are now planned: a Holocaust museum in Macedonia's capital, Skopje, and farther south, in Bitola, the restoration of a 500-year-old Sephardi cemetery.

"We must not forget them," said Dr. Ivan Dejanov, president of the Macedonian-Israeli Friendship Association.

Dejanov, 65, and other Macedonians recall their Jewish classmates, neighbors and colleagues with fondness. They remember the joint business ventures, the shared Passover seders. They speak of the parallel fate and undying spirit of Jews and Macedonians — "brothers in misfortune, suffering and destiny."

The drive to honor the memory of local Jews, they say, is motivated partly by the ignorance among today's youth of the Jewish chapter in Macedonian history and partly by the polarization among ethnic groups within the former Yugoslavia.

Macedonia broke free of Yugoslavia in April 1992, just as Bosnia descended into a civil war among Serbs, Croats and Muslims. Keenly aware of this continued ethnic polarization, the surviving Macedonian Jewish community — a tiny but tight-knit group of 182 — has endorsed wholeheartedly the plans for the memorials.

"Here in the Balkans, where these problems are especially acute, we have an obligation to show what happens when people try to destroy each other," said Viktor Mizrahi, president of the Macedonian Jewish community.

**Harmony comes to abrupt end**

At their peak, in 1910, some 10,000 Jews lived in what is now Macedonia.

The first are said to have arrived at the time of Alexander the Great some 2,500 years ago. Sephardi Jews began trickling in after their expulsion from Spain in 1492.

They settled primarily in three areas: Bitola, Skopje and Stip. The relative harmony Jews enjoyed in Macedonia came to an abrupt end after Bulgaria invaded in the winter of 1941.

Though Bulgaria is lauded for protecting its own Jews during the war, it did not spare those in its occupied territories.

Gligorov, then working for a Jewish banker in Skopje and active in the resistance movement, recalled that in early March 1943 he learned from a contact within the Bulgarian forces that Jews in Skopje would be rounded up.

Gligorov warned his Jewish friends, helping several obtain fake documents to flee through Albania to Italy.

But others refused to heed his warning.

On March 11, the Bulgarians went door to door to round up Jews. From his second-floor office, Gligorov drew back the curtains and watched his friends file past, bags in hand, toward the train station.

"I didn't know their fate, but I knew things would not go well," Gligorov, 80, said in an interview.

Meanwhile, a similar scene was unfolding in Bitola.

Despite Bulgarian pronouncements that anyone sheltering Jews would share their fate, Boris and Vaska Altiparmak took in four Jewish teen-age boys.

After hiding them for a month, the Altiparmaks gave the four peasant garb and sent them to join the partisans in the mountains. Overall, only 167 Macedonian Jews are said to have survived the Holocaust.

Boris and Vaska Altiparmak were honored in 1991 by the Israeli Knesset as Righteous Gentiles.

Boris Altiparmak, 84, is now honorary chairman of the Jewish cemetery restoration committee; his son, Vladimir, a real estate developer, is board secretary.

Like many Jewish cemeteries in Eastern and central Europe, the one in Bitola is unkempt, with many headstones overturned and scarred with graffiti.

Vladimir Altiparmak believes that Bitola, and its vanished Jewish community, deserve better.

"When we lost so many Jews, we lost as a town. It is our duty to restore it, because this would have been their wishes."

Plans for the restoration first surfaced 10 years ago, when the local city council discussed building new apartments on the burial ground.

Last month, the cemetery committee made its first improvement. It installed a wrought-iron gate, replete with Jewish stars, to keep out vandals.

Funding is of course a challenge. But so far, several services, such as the architect's design, have been donated free of charge.

"We can't expect the government to take on such an issue, with so many other issues to deal with," said Zdravko Sami, vice president of the Macedonian Jewish community.

Sami, of Skopje, is a Bitola native whose entire family is buried in the cemetery — save for the two dozen killed in Treblinka. As for the Holocaust museum in Skopje, things are moving more slowly.

The Macedonians aren't sure how large they want it and whether to combine it with a Jewish cultural center.

A site, however, has already been chosen — in the old Jewish quarter where a synagogue once stood.

But the local mayor still needs to be dissuaded from using the lot for a new hotel. Gligorov is expected to weigh in on the issue.

"Macedonia truly lost a great deal with the loss of its Jewish community," he said. "We need a memorial to their life and death here." □

**Vandals hit Latvian synagogue**

MOSCOW (JTA) — Vandals have painted a swastika and anti-Semitic slogans on a synagogue in the Latvian capital of Riga.

The Dec. 19 desecration came after a neo-Nazi group known as Lightning and Cross distributed leaflets in Riga calling Jews and Russians enemies of the Latvian people.

The slogans in the leaflets were the same as those painted at the synagogue entrance, according to a Latvian Jewish official. A Latvian prosecutor said the neo-Nazi group is illegal, adding that it incites racial hatred and calls for the overthrow of the Latvian government.

The group's leaflets called on Latvians to defend themselves by fighting Jews and the Latvian authorities.

"Political and economic power in Latvia is in the hands of international Jewry," whom the leaflet went on to describe as "racially inferior degenerates who strive to exterminate Latvians as a nation and to completely ruin Latvia's industry and agriculture." □

## Netanyahu in marathon talks to secure support for budget

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu held marathon talks with coalition partners this week in a bid to secure their support for his budget.

Facing a deadline Wednesday night for the Knesset to give final approval of the 1998 budget, some key coalition members were conditioning their support on more social spending and canceling planned cuts.

If the Dec. 31 deadline passes, the government will have another three months to try to pass the budget, but if that fails, the government would fall.

Further complicating matters is a three-week "reprieve" the United States was said to have given Netanyahu to pass the budget before presenting the scope of a redeployment in the West Bank.

The extension was issued out of concern that hard-line members of Netanyahu's coalition would turn the budget vote into a no-confidence motion if the prime minister announced any specific figures on a pullback before the budget was passed. Likud Knesset member Ze'ev "Benny" Begin said over the weekend that he planned to abstain in the budget vote because he believed the bill's defeat could delay Netanyahu from presenting the specifics of a further redeployment.

"If U.S. Secretary of State [Madeleine] Albright gave the prime minister a three-week extension to announce how much territory he plans to hand over to the Palestinians, it is acceptable to give him a three-month extension so he can say that he cannot hand over anything."

As part of his efforts to round up a majority of support for the budget legislation, Netanyahu met Friday with Begin, one of his most outspoken critics. It was their first meeting since Begin resigned from the Cabinet in January to protest the Hebron agreement.

Israeli media have estimated that at least 10 coalition members, a number sufficient to assure the bill's defeat, were considering voting against the budget — or abstaining from or not participating in the vote.

Much of the dispute regarding the budget has centered on government-proposed changes to Israel's national health law. Foreign Minister David Levy threatened last week to resign if the Cabinet approved the changes, which include charging the public fees for using certain medical services.

Finance Minister Ya'acov Ne'eman was reported to be considering resigning if the budget framework is broken. Ne'eman said he would not cave in to what he termed "sectored interests." Coalition members have used the budget deliberations in recent days as leverage to demand spending in other areas related to their interests.

The National Religious Party, after talks with Netanyahu on Sunday, said it would back the budget if the premier made good on promises for additional funds for education and building bypass roads in the territories.

Netanyahu said Sunday that he believed coalition demands would be resolved as soon as the health issue was rectified. □

## Italians protest relocation of jailed former SS officer

By Ruth E. Gruber

ROME (JTA) — Erich Priebke's new neighbors are unhappy with the Christmas present given to the former SS captain.

On the orders of a military appeals court, Priebke,

who was convicted in July of taking part in the 1944 massacre of 335 people, was moved Dec. 23 from a military hospital into a Rome apartment to serve out the remaining three months of his sentence.

Neighbors from the apartment building and surrounding neighborhood, including a number of Jews, have been protesting his presence.

"The protest is unceasing," Italian television said over the weekend.

Protesters carried placards outside the building and stretched banners from windows with slogans such as "Merry Christmas, Murderer," "No One Wants You," and "Priebke, Get Out of Our House."

Graffiti scrawled on the wall read "335 Times No."

Priebke, 84, was moved into the apartment on a private street in a residential area because of worsening health. The apartment was put at Priebke's disposal by a group called Man and Freedom, which has called him a political prisoner.

Heavy security was stationed nearby, and bars were installed on the apartment windows.

Tullia Zevi, president of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities, called the decision to move Priebke "incredible."

Priebke was sentenced last summer by a military court to five years in prison for taking part in the Ardeatine Caves massacre, 75 of whose 335 victims were Jews. The court reduced his sentence because of the time he had spent in jail since his extradition from Argentina in 1994. □

## Collection of Yiddish songs revived by Italian publisher

By Ruth E. Gruber

ROME (JTA) — A collection of songs by the Yiddish songwriter Mordechai Gebirtig has appeared for the first time in Italy.

The collection includes Italian translations of all previously published works by Gebirtig as well as a number of recently discovered poems and songs by the author, who was killed by the Nazis in Krakow, Poland, in 1942.

The release of the book by the Florence, Italy-based Jewish publishing house Giuntina reflects the growing interest in Yiddish in Italy.

The book is sold with a cassette recording of performances of some of the songs.

"It is probably the most complete collection of Gebirtig's songs to appear in any language," said Rudi Assuntino, who edited the collection.

Gebirtig, born in Krakow in 1877, worked as a carpenter in his native city but also wrote some of the most famous Yiddish songs, including "Reyzele," "Kinder-yorn," and "Moyshle, Mayn Fraynd" as well as "Undzer Shtetl Brent."

Gebirtig's songs are about everyday life — love, politics, poverty, work, war and prayer. He continued to write even during the Holocaust, when he was confined to the Krakow Ghetto. His last song, "S'tut Vey..." ("It Hurts..."), was written shortly before the Nazis shot him dead on the street. It deals with the indifference of Poles to the fate of the Jews.

Assuntino said he hopes the translation would help bring Gebirtig's songs into the mainstream.

"Why is Yiddish literature considered part of world literature and Yiddish songs not?" he asked.

"If history had been different, if several million Jews had not been exterminated and their culture canceled from the face of the earth, Gebirtig clearly today would be as important as the Gershwin brothers," he added. □