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81st Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Swiss put Jews in labor camps

Some of Switzerland's most famous ski resorts were the sites of forced labor camps for Jewish refugees during World War II, according to a British television documentary aired this week.

The program adds to the mounting evidence that the Swiss placed Jews in such camps, a charge Switzerland officially denies. [Page 3]

Israeli Knesset passes budget

The Israeli Knesset passed the 1998 budget by a vote of 58-52.

The vote was seen as the first test for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu after the resignation of Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy left him with a one-vote majority in Israel's Parliament. [Page 1]

U.S. optimistic on peace process

The White House is optimistic that Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy's resignation will not harm the already-stalled peace process.

The Clinton administration said regardless of the changes in the Israeli government, it still sees the same "urgency" in moving forward on the peace front. [Page 1]

Court to examine alleged torture

An expanded panel of nine Israeli High Court justices is scheduled to hear petitions challenging Israel's use of physical pressure to interrogate Palestinian prisoners.

The Shin Bet confirmed that it uses methods such as sleep deprivation, loud music and putting a sack on prisoners' heads during interrogations.

Chief Justice Aharon Barak called for the special panel because of an increased number of petitions submitted by Palestinians complaining of being tortured during questioning.

Germany close to accord

Germany is edging closer to giving funds to the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany that can be used to compensate Holocaust survivors in Eastern Europe.

The Claims Conference is gathering information about the estimated 20,000 survivors it says would be eligible for compensation.

While there is no agreement yet, the two sides are expected to meet in Washington in February to continue talks.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Netanyahu passes first test, but will his coalition survive?

By David Landau

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The Israeli government may be down, but Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu insists his coalition is far from out.

"The coalition will hold," Netanyahu predicted defiantly on Sunday, just hours after Foreign Minister David Levy resigned. The prime minister brushed aside near-universal predictions among Israel's political commentators that the departure of Levy and his Geshar faction — which leaves Netanyahu with a thin 61-59 majority in the Knesset — was the beginning of the end for his 19-month-old government.

Indeed, his government survived its first test a day later, when the Knesset approved the 1998 state budget by a vote of 58-52.

But Netanyahu faces yet another major hurdle as he turns his attention — and seeks Cabinet support — for a new round of peace diplomacy aimed at achieving a further Israeli redeployment on the West Bank.

U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross was expected in Israel this week for talks in advance of Netanyahu's meeting with President Clinton in Washington on Jan. 20. Clinton is also scheduled to meet that week with Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat.

In the coming weeks, Netanyahu will not only be fighting for the survival of his rightist-religious coalition. He also will be battling for his own survival as the leader of the Likud Party and as its candidate for prime minister in the next election — whenever that is held.

Underscoring Netanyahu's difficult position in his own party was an acrimonious meeting of Likud ministers and Knesset members on the eve of the crucial budget vote.

Speaker after speaker voiced the widespread resentment felt in the party over the premier's handling of the intricate coalition negotiations surrounding the annual budget bill.

Netanyahu was mired last week in negotiations with rebellious coalition members who pressed successfully for funding of special interests.

Netanyahu put off a scheduled vote in the Knesset on the budget last week in the hope of securing support from Levy and his faction. As a result, the government missed a Dec. 31 deadline to pass the budget, though by law it receives a three-month extension.

By leaving Levy and his five-seat faction out in the cold until the budget was all but wrapped up, Netanyahu and Finance Minister Ya'akov Ne'eman created a crisis that could have been avoided, the premier's critics argued.

After Levy threatened to resign late last week, Netanyahu and Ne'eman promised to provide funds for programs for Levy's low-income constituency.

But in announcing his resignation, Levy said he had rejected the pledge for additional social spending because it had come too late.

Levy said he was resigning because of the government's "insensitive" social policy and its handling of peace negotiations. He warned that "stonewalling" by the government could backfire to a point where a settlement with the Palestinians would be imposed upon Israel.

"There comes a time when one must stand up and make a clear, unequivocal statement," Levy said. "I am fed up, and no longer consider myself part of this government."

In the end, Levy's Geshar faction voted against the \$57.5 billion budget. Likud Knesset member Ze'ev "Benny" Begin, one of Netanyahu's most strident critics, abstained.

Many key Likud figures see Netanyahu's performance on the budget as yet another

MIDEAST FOCUS

Senator shuttles for peace

Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) is in the Middle East on an unofficial peace mission.

Specter, who is Jewish, traveled to Israel after meeting with Syrian President Hafez Assad over the weekend. It is Specter's third such excursion.

American detained in Israel

Israel's Shin Bet arrested an American of Lebanese descent two weeks ago on suspicion of being involved in terrorism.

Further details about the man, who has apparently lived in Israel for two years and is married to an Israeli, are under a publication ban.

Turkish naval vessels in Haifa

American and Turkish naval vessels arrived in Haifa ahead of naval maneuvers to be carried out with Israel later this week in the eastern Mediterranean.

Jordan plans to participate as an observer.

The sea and air rescue drills have drawn sharp criticism from some Arab countries, which disapprove of Ankara's deepening defense ties with Israel.

Jordan's schools get Israeli book

An Israeli textbook, translated into Arabic, will be introduced into the Jordanian school system for the first time.

The book, "Why Don't Different People Live in Peace," was spotted by a Jordanian educator at a conference in Jerusalem, who suggested that it be translated and published in Jordan.

Settlers plan Har Homa building

A group of Israeli settlers plan to begin their own construction at a controversial Jerusalem neighborhood this weekend.

The group, Our Jerusalem, is frustrated by what it sees as the slow pace of construction at Har Homa.

in a series of decision-making mishaps that have dogged his premiership, reflecting both on his character and on his leadership qualities.

Levy's remarks merely articulated publicly what many other ministers, including Likud ministers, have been muttering privately for months. His departure may bring that widely felt dissent to the surface — further weakening Netanyahu's present position and future prospects.

But Netanyahu and his political allies contend that the very fragility of the coalition will enhance unity and discipline among the remaining partners.

"Some mistakes have been made," Netanyahu was quoted as telling coalition members before Monday's budget vote, "but none as serious as in 1992, by allowing the left-wing camp to rise to power."

Netanyahu pointed out that previous Israeli governments had operated with only a one-vote majority in the Knesset and that he was confident his coalition would continue at least through 2000, the scheduled date for the next national elections.

Members of the premier's circle reason that the seven parties comprising the coalition do not want elections now because few Knesset members want to risk losing their seats.

A source close to Avigdor Kahalani said the Third Way Party, with its four seats, would not bolt the government.

At the same time, however, 17 coalition Knesset members, who make up the Land of Israel group, say they are committed to bringing down Netanyahu's government if he goes ahead with any redeployment, regardless of its dimensions.

Many political commentators believe that the redeployment will be Netanyahu's undoing.

The departure of Levy, considered a moderate on matters related to peace negotiations with the Palestinians, gives further influence to the hard-liners in Netanyahu's coalition who are opposed to any further territorial concessions in the West Bank, much less the "credible" pullback American and Palestinian officials have been pressing Israel to implement.

Netanyahu said this week he would not go to Washington without a decision in the Cabinet on the guidelines he would present to the Americans. Netanyahu has denied reports that he pledged to carry out a double-digit pullback, somewhere between 10 and 15 percent.

For its part, the Clinton administration said regardless of the changes in the Israeli government, it still sees the same "urgency" in moving forward on the peace front.

The need for progress is "not based on the particular makeup of a particular government at a particular time," State Department spokesman James Rubin said this week.

Netanyahu, meanwhile, is counting on the left-wing opposition parties — Labor and Meretz — to supply the votes he will need to push a redeployment plan through the Knesset.

Netanyahu also apparently believes that coalition hard-liners will ultimately think twice before pulling the plug on his government and risking a Labor victory in an early election.

He warned Sunday at his news conference that a Labor government would return Israel to its pre-1967 borders and would divide Jerusalem — a message clearly directed at the nationalist camp.

Until Levy's resignation, Netanyahu's first presumption seemed fairly safe. Labor leader Ehud Barak had indicated in the past that if the redeployment were considered substantial, his party would support it.

But now there is a growing number of Laborites who oppose backing Netanyahu on redeployment. After all, they say, if the longtime Likud stalwart Levy faulted Netanyahu for thwarting peace prospects, why should Labor support the Likud premier?

But the prime minister's greatest peril may come from his own camp and his future status as leader of the party.

Levy's departure has thrown the spotlight on Yitzhak Mordechai, the popular defense minister and the man who, according to the polls, would give Barak a far closer race than the battered Netanyahu.

If those polls persist — and begin affecting Likud rank-and-file opinion — Netanyahu could face an uphill struggle to retain control of the party. □



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JEWISH WORLD

Nazi looted art in N.Y. museum

Jewish families who claim the Nazis stole their paintings say they will "go ahead with all guns flaring" in their attempt to regain the artworks.

The Museum of Modern Art in New York, which is sending the paintings on to a museum in Barcelona, Spain, turned down a request to keep the two paintings by Austrian artist Egon Schiele.

German court rejects land claim

Jewish families suing to reclaim land sold during the Nazi era suffered a setback in a German court.

The court rejected the first six of some 900 claims, saying that the properties were sold for reasons other than duress.

Papon trial resumes

The trial of Maurice Papon resumed in France with the accused Nazi collaborator once again denying involvement in the deportation of Jews during World War II.

The 87-year-old former Cabinet minister, beset by health problems, blamed the Germans for deception and said the only thing he could be accused of was naivety.

Papon is on trial for allegedly deporting 1,560 Jews, 223 of them children, while he was an official in the Bordeaux region.

Argentina to act on desecration

An Argentine official promised the country's Jewish leaders that he would propose a special law to punish those who destroy tombstones.

Sixty-six tombstones in two Jewish cemeteries near the Argentine capital were vandalized in late December.

The new civilian police chief in Buenos Aires has blamed policemen for the attacks.

Stamp honors Chernobyl children

Israel issued a postal stamp honoring the work of Chabad-Lubavitch with Jewish children at risk as a result of radiation stemming from the 1986 Chernobyl disaster.

The commemorative stamp honors Chabad's Children of Chernobyl project, which has brought a total of 1,527 children to Israel.

Communications Minister Limor Livnat unveiled the stamp at a Knesset ceremony last week.

Swastika put on legislator's door

Vandals spray-painted a swastika on the office of a Jewish New York City councilman.

Police are calling the attack on Anthony Weiner's Brooklyn office a bias crime.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Survivors recall Swiss policy of using Jews for slave labor

By Douglas Davis

LONDON (JTA) — Some of Switzerland's most famous ski resorts were the sites of forced labor camps for Jewish refugees during World War II.

This latest revelation — unveiled in a British television documentary this week — is likely to further tarnish the pristine reputation of neutrality that the Swiss have nurtured over the past half-century.

Switzerland has always denied that any of the approximately 25,000 Jewish refugees who were permitted to enter the country during the war were subjected to forced labor, along with other non-Swiss Jews — some of whom had lived in Switzerland for years.

But the mounting body of evidence, supported by recently released official documents and backed by victims' statements, has swept away any lingering doubts.

"I have not spoken of this for 50 years," said Walter Fischer, now 82 and living in France. "But I am convinced the Swiss are guilty of terrible crimes. They exploited us, and they have blood on their hands."

It is now known that a network of more than 100 work camps was established by an official decree on March 12, 1940.

Those who were interned do not equate the Swiss labor camps with the Nazi concentration and death camps, but they do say Jews were held, against their will, in harsh conditions.

"I know we were singled out as Jews because Jews were the only ones there," said Arnold Marque, now 76 and living in California.

Marque had moved to Switzerland from Germany and had been working as an apprentice baker for three years before the start of the war.

He was sent to a camp at Bad Schauenberg where, he recalled, the food consisted of cabbage and potatoes, the pay was equivalent to slave wages and any perceived violations by inmates resulted in threats by the Swiss authorities that they would be sent back to Germany.

Guido Koller, a historian at the Swiss Federal Archive in Zurich, has confirmed that "sanctions were applied" and that some Jews were indeed handed over to the Nazis for "misbehavior."

"The legal status of the refugees meant that the government could send them to places where they didn't want to go," he said. "They had to do work that they didn't want to — it was compulsory."

Betty Bloom, who now lives in London, considers herself lucky.

She was 13 years old when she arrived in Switzerland after narrowly escaping a 1943 deportation to Nazi death camps by the government of Vichy France.

"We were treated like criminals," said Bloom, recalling the six months she spent in Swiss camps without proper food or medical attention.

Even when she contracted tuberculosis, which left her unable to have children, the Swiss did not provide medical help.

"Yet I think of myself as one of the luckier victims of the Swiss refugee policy," she says.

"Ten other children from my French children's home crossed the border but were sent back by the Swiss border guards, straight into the arms of the Germans," she added.

"They perished in Auschwitz. No apology from the Swiss will bring them back to life."

According to Jacques Picard, a Swiss historian who is research director for a Swiss commission of inquiry into the camps, conditions in the camps varied.

But Charlotte Weber, who now lives in Zurich, recalled being fired as a young commandant of a camp called Bienenberg because she was considered too kind to the Jewish women under her control.

For the Swiss authorities "these Jewish refugees were just third-class citizens," said Weber, 85.

"I was astonished when I discovered the conditions in other camps — Jews were treated abominably. It made me ashamed to be Swiss." □

Muslim symbol desecration elicits empathy, controversy

By Nancy Zuckerbrod
Washington Jewish Week

WASHINGTON (JTA) — American Muslim and Jewish leaders jointly condemned the desecration of a Muslim symbol near the White House last month, but comments from one Arab American leader created tension between the two groups.

M.T. Mehdi, president of the National Council on Islamic Affairs, had pushed for the display of a star and crescent near a Chanukah menorah and Christmas tree on the south side of the White House.

The star was defaced with a swastika and detached from the crescent in an incident that the U.S. Park Police is investigating.

Over the weekend, Muslim groups erected a new star and crescent.

But Mehdi's comments in The Washington Post last week regarding the incident caused an uproar in the Jewish community. He called the Nazis "the real founders of Israel," because he says the Nazi destruction of European Jewry led to the creation of the Jewish state.

"We hate the swastika because it reflects the Nazis and the hated Hitler, who killed 6 million Jews and frightened European Jews to go to Palestine and create the Jewish state," said Mehdi, clarifying his position in an interview.

"Hitler helped Israel more than Herzl. Herzl was unable to do that, so in a lopsided way Hitler is the father of Israel," said Mehdi, referring to Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism.

American Jewish groups reacted angrily to Mehdi's comments.

"Instead of injecting bigoted ideas into the circumstances we're facing, he should focus on bringing Jews and Christians together with Muslims and Arab Americans," said David Friedman, regional director of the Anti-Defamation League.

Arab American groups supported the Jewish response.

James Zogby of the Arab American Institute said Mehdi's comments were "absolutely the wrong response to what happened." □

Head of Los Angeles mortuary sentenced to 2 years in prison

By Tom Tugend

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — The director of the local Chevra Kadisha Mortuary has been sentenced to two years in prison and the facility has been temporarily closed.

Zalman Manela, the founder of the 21-year-old mortuary, was incarcerated after pleading no contest to charges of forgery and grand theft.

According to the Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles, Manela, 49, admitted stealing thousands of dollars from a deceased woman, Celia Klein.

Manela said he took the money to pay for Klein's funeral and to donate funds in her memory to a charity.

Unlike many other cities, Los Angeles does not have a volunteer, community-run chevra kadisha, and Manela's mortuary was among the few in town run by Orthodox Jews strictly according to halachah, or Jewish law.

In a written statement to the sentencing judge, Manela

recounted that he was visited by Klein's caregiver, Carina Cabellero, who had found the mortuary's card among her employer's belongings after the elderly woman died.

Manela believed that Klein had no heirs, he wrote, and presumed she would have wanted her estate to go to charity, rather than to the state. He also wanted to compensate Cabellero for her lengthy care of Klein.

Subsequently, Manela and Cabellero forged documents giving Manela power of attorney for Klein's estate. They told bank employees that Klein was alive and withdrew some \$55,000 from her accounts, according to Manela's attorney, Thomas Mesereau Jr.

Manela used his share of the money to pay for Klein's funeral and put the rest into a charitable account, Mesereau said. Manela, who was arrested at Klein's bank as he was trying to withdraw additional funds, confessed immediately. He has made full restitution, according to his lawyer.

A hearing has been set for Jan. 26 before an administrative law judge to determine whether the Chevra Kadisha Mortuary will be permanently closed or allowed to reopen. □

Swiss president's interview provokes new controversy

By Fredy Rom

BERN (JTA) — The year has begun with a new controversy involving Switzerland's president, Swiss Jewish leaders and the World Jewish Congress.

The conflict was sparked by an interview the new president, Flavio Cotti, gave to the Swiss newspaper Tribune de Geneve on the eve of his Jan. 1 inauguration.

Cotti said critics of Switzerland's wartime role — and handling of bank accounts belonging to Holocaust victims — are limited to certain geographical regions in the United States, especially New York.

Kalman Sultanik, vice president of the World Jewish Congress, criticized Cotti for using the same language as Kurt Waldheim, the former Austrian president who was barred from entering the United States because of his alleged wartime role in a Nazi military unit.

Waldheim said he was a victim of "interest groups in New York and the lobby of the American East Coast," Sultanik recalled.

Swiss Jewish leaders, while critical of Cotti's remarks, objected to the comparison of the president with Waldheim.

Thomas Lyssy, vice president of the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities, said such comparisons "must be rejected."

Sultanik said he was only comparing the use of language, not the two men.

But Lyssy also criticized the new president for failing to mention "the increased anti-Semitism" in Switzerland in his inaugural address.

Cotti's remarks marked the second time in two years that a New Year's interview with a Swiss president provoked controversy.

A year ago, outgoing President Jean Delamuraz accused Jewish groups of engaging in "blackmail and extortion" in their efforts to obtain restitution from Swiss banks that were holding the assets of Holocaust victims.

Meanwhile, a Swiss prosecutor is investigating a Swiss neo-Nazi who recently published a brochure that blames Jews for the controversy regarding Swiss involvement in Nazi gold and denigrates commemorating the Holocaust. □