



Daily News Bulletin

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81st Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Pollard's release urged

Leaders of Judaism's three main streams urged President Clinton to commute Jonathan Pollard's life sentence for spying for Israel.

In their letter to Clinton, the Reform, Conservative and Orthodox leaders declared that the Jewish faith is "predicated on the spirit of penitence" and urged the president to "grant mercy" to Pollard.

Pollard is serving his sentence in a North Carolina prison.

Palestinians arrest Hamas leader

Palestinian police arrested the leader of Hamas after the group issued a statement demanding the resignation of Palestinian Authority officials.

The arrest is the latest sign of tension between the two groups stemming from last week's brutal murder of one of Hamas' bomb-makers, Mohi-yedine Sharif.

Palestinian Authority sources say a suspected Hamas activist confessed to involvement in Sharif's murder.

Hamas rejects the findings.

The fundamentalist Islamic group claims that the Palestinian Authority collaborated with Israel in Sharif's death and has vowed to avenge the murder by spreading "sadness and horror" throughout Israel.

Commission to expedite claims

An international commission was established to expedite the processing of insurance claims made by Holocaust survivors and heirs of victims.

The insurance companies participating in the new commission are: Allianz Holding of Germany, Assicurazioni Generali of Italy, AXA Group of France and Zurich Insurance of Switzerland.

Jewish groups that signed the agreement included the World Jewish Restitution Organization, the World Jewish Congress and the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany. [Page 3]

Because of the Passover holiday and renovation work at JTA headquarters, the JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN will not be published Monday, April 13 and Wednesday, April 15 through Monday, April 20.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Muppets cross the street to join Israelis, Palestinians

By Avi Machlis

JERUSALEM (JTA) — When colorful Israeli and Palestinian muppets met on screen last week for the first time in a new joint production of "Sesame Street," their reactions mirrored the mutual apprehension that exists in everyday life here.

Haneen, an orange, female Palestinian muppet-monster was frightened by Kipi, the tall Israeli porcupine, who towered over her like Big Bird from the original American series. Purple, pigtailed Dafi, an Israeli girl muppet, was spooked by the foreign-sounding cock-a-doodle-doo of Kareem, a friendly Palestinian rooster.

With the help of bilingual mediators, they learned to look and listen to one another and see past the differences.

This is the underlying theme of "Rechov Sumsum/Shara'a Simsim," in Hebrew and Arabic, respectively, which was launched last week and will air in Israel and the West Bank during the coming weeks.

It consists of 60 shows for Jewish children, 20 for Palestinians and several "crossover" segments where residents of the two streets meet.

Bringing Israeli and Palestinian muppets together, however, was not as easy as the seamless segments might suggest — even children's shows are not immune from politics in the Middle East.

For more than two years, Israeli and Palestinian production teams, with the help of American mediators, addressed complex educational issues amid a difficult reality.

"There were no easy moments," said Lewis Bernstein, the executive producer of the project who represented Children's Television Workshop, the American creator of "Sesame Street."

The project is a joint production of Children's Television Workshop, Israel Educational Television and Al-Quds University's Institute for Modern Media.

"It started with high hopes at the beginning of the peace process with the handshake on the White House lawn," he said, referring to the historic launching of the Oslo peace process with Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat in September 1993.

"But there was a real sense on both sides that the asymmetry between the groups would be difficult to bridge, both on the political and national levels of development, and on the level of television development."

Indeed, reality crashed through from the start of production. Just days before a scheduled seminar between the Israeli and Palestinian production teams in November 1995, then-Prime Minister Rabin was assassinated.

And throughout the planning and production stages, the ups and downs of a peace process riddled with violence threatened to scuttle the project. Bernstein was constantly summoned, like U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross is in the political realm, to keep the program on track.

"Our job was to keep them focused on the program, and to say: 'With all this going on you still have to give this to the children,'" said Bernstein.

"I had an easier time than Ross," he said jokingly. "He deals with real people. I deal with muppets."

But even muppets presented problems, as producers tried to create a fantasy land in which children could learn real-life lessons of tolerance along with the alphabet.

"We wanted to strike a balance between being grounded in reality, and at the same time being positive and forward looking," said Daoud Kuttab, the Palestinian producer

MIDEAST FOCUS

Israeli company to sidestep ban

An Israeli company is planning to set up a plant in the United States to manufacture Uzi submachine guns.

The effort would sidestep a new order issued by President Clinton banning the import of this type of weapon.

The Israeli daily Ha'aretz reported that the factory would be jointly run by Israel Military Industries and an American manufacturer.

The report said the Israel and U.S. firms established a relationship two years ago to jointly market the Uzi.

Ship blown ashore near Eilat

A tourist vessel broke free from its anchor near the Israeli city of Eilat and was blown toward shore.

The vessel's movement caused serious damage to rare coral reefs.

The boat, carrying 52 tourists and four crew members, had been on a routine excursion.

Israeli naval police rescued all of the passengers aboard.

But nature reserve officials believe that the damage caused to the reef was irreversible.

Center on Bedouin dedicated

A center on research issues involving the Bedouin in Israel was dedicated at Ben-Gurion University in the Negev.

The center is an effort to develop information and data about the Bedouin, who have experienced "the greatest discrimination that's been going on for 50 years," according to Robert Arnow.

Arnow is chairman of the board emeritus of the American Associates of Ben-Gurion University and a force behind the center.

Former Israeli Cabinet member Moshe Arens is the chairman of the advisory committee of the new center.

of the show. Kuttab, a prominent journalist and director of the Institute of Modern Media at Al-Quds University in eastern Jerusalem, remembers how the Israeli team wanted the children and muppets to meet as friends in the first program, while the Palestinian team "thought it would be more credible to the children to have the relationship build up gradually."

But where would they meet?

Both sides had already agreed that the Palestinians and the Israelis would have their own streets. They discussed a park that would link the two streets and serve as a meeting ground.

But in true Middle Eastern style, land was a loaded issue.

"We had to decide who owned the park," said Kuttab, "and we didn't want to create a border in the middle. It just produced more problems than solutions."

Dolly Wolbrum, the Israeli producer, protested because, she said, the Palestinians were imposing adult norms on the children.

"Only adults could ask who the park belongs to," she said. "Children just want to play."

Kuttab and his crew proposed a compromise. Residents of "Rehov Sumsum" and "Shara'a Simsim" would meet in specially designed crossover segments.

In one segment, Amal, the Arab Israeli doctor of "Rehov Sumsum," brings Kipi the porcupine and muppet Dafi to "Shara'a Simsim" to visit her Palestinian cousin Adel. In another, an Israeli boy takes a wrong turn on his bicycle and gets a flat tire in the Palestinian neighborhood, where he is helped out by its Arabic-speaking residents.

These scenes created a particular challenge, since the conversations are in both Hebrew and Arabic — "the language of war" to the other side, according to Bernstein.

Wolbrum explains the rationale: "One of the ideas was that even if the children don't understand the scene, they should get used to hearing the other's language."

Research conducted prior to the show's production showed that children continued to watch the show even when the language shifted to one they didn't understand. The characters they saw did not fit common stereotypes, such as Leila, a 12-year-old Palestinian girl — and a computer freak.

"We wanted Israelis to realize that there are intellectuals among the Palestinians, and that they are not all dishwashers and janitors," said Bernstein. "We thought the best way to humanize the Palestinian side was to create a variety of interesting, human characters."

Program participants also found that their own stereotypes were challenged.

Bernstein, a kippah-wearing, modern Orthodox Jew, remembers being introduced to the girl who played Leila on "Shara'a Simsim." Seeing his kippah, at first she did not believe he was an American producer; she was convinced he was a Jewish settler from the West Bank.

"We were trying to get both groups to focus beyond the symbols," said Bernstein. "The whole idea is to teach kids that there are real people behind those things you are sometimes afraid of."

But when they got to the real symbols, compromise proved difficult. Wolbrum wanted to humanize the image of the Israeli soldier in the eyes of the Palestinians — but the Palestinians objected, as did Children's Television Workshop, which does not allow soldiers in its programs.

And when the Palestinians wanted to use the word "Palestine," Wolbrum was afraid of a backlash from publicly funded Israel Educational Television.

The word was included in a script about a runner who represented the Palestinians in the 1996 Olympics, but the scene was never shot because the day the program involving the athlete was slated to be filmed, the Gaza Strip was sealed off because of a suicide bombing.

Jerusalem, the thorniest of all Palestinian-Israeli issues and a potent symbol, was included in a scene showing Israeli and Palestinian children discussing pictures they drew of the Holy City for an exhibit at the Israel Museum.

"The scene depicts tolerance and gets a message across that Jerusalem is holy to everyone," said Wolbrum.

Perhaps, say all involved, Israeli and Palestinian leaders could learn a lesson or two from these pioneering children and muppets. □



Daily News Bulletin

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JEWISH WORLD

Israel to support sanctions

Israel has come out in favor of sanctioning Russia for failing to stop Iranian efforts to acquire missile technology, an Israeli newspaper reported.

According to the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz*, senior Israeli officials made clear that they do not think Moscow is doing enough to stop the transfer of missile technology to Iran. Barring any sudden turnaround in Russia's behavior, the officials were quoted as saying, Israel would back a proposal in the U.S. Congress to sanction Russia.

Report: Spain didn't buy Nazi gold

A Spanish inquiry into that country's gold purchases found that Spain did not illegally purchase Nazi-looted gold.

But the commission looking into the gold deals said Spain should provide appropriate assistance to the World Sephardic Organization, which represents a large number of Spanish Jews. The committee's findings contradict findings by Jewish groups and U.S. officials.

Embassy in Latvia evacuated

The Israeli Embassy in Riga was evacuated after officials received a bomb threat. No explosives were found. The threat came one week after the bombing of the Latvian capital's only synagogue.

In a related development, the commander in chief of Latvia's army commander resigned. Latvia's National Security Council recommended last week that Juris Dalbins be ousted for participating in a march last month of Latvian Nazi veterans.

Zhirinovsky sounds off

Russia's most famous anti-Semitic politician has struck again. At a news conference, Vladimir Zhirinovsky, who heads the third largest faction in Russia's lower house of Parliament, blamed Jews for starting World War II and provoking the Holocaust. When the number of Jews in a country grows too large, "war breaks out there," Zhirinovsky said.

Jewish group criticizes Giuliani

A progressive Jewish group in New York City is criticizing Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's recent handling of the 1991 Crown Heights riots.

"This could be a time of healing, but instead the mayor has chosen to create new divisions among the residents of Crown Heights with this one-sided apology," said Rachel Rosenbloom, executive director of Jews for Racial and Economic Justice.

Giuliani apologized to the Brooklyn neighborhood's Chasidic population recently on behalf of the city, which last week reached a \$1.1 million agreement with 91 members of that community.

Israel lifts ban on rabbi, but he won't go there now

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK (JTA) — An American rabbi who was banned from Israel more than two years ago says that even though the ban has been lifted, he has no desire to visit the Jewish state.

"I would not go now, not for any reason," said Rabbi Abraham Hecht, who was banned from the country in December 1995, a month after Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated. "Not because I'm afraid, but because the right would go crazy and the left would, too."

Israeli officials said the ban was imposed because Hecht's remarks were interpreted by many as having given rabbinic approval to murder for the sake of stopping the transfer of land from Israeli control to Arab control. In addition, the rabbinic organization Hecht heads is asking Israel to apologize for having banned him in the first place.

The Rabbinical Alliance of America, an Orthodox group that claims 650 members, has formally requested that the State of Israel issue an official apology "for the calumnious insult heaped upon him by the previous Labor government."

The Rabbinical Alliance's statement, rails against "the leftist, anti-religion government headed by Shimon Peres, [which] declared that Rabbi Hecht was to be banned from entering Israel."

"The ban, loudly touted and publicized by the government-controlled media, sought to defame and denigrate the name and character of a prominent world Jewish leader who fearlessly opposed the Oslo Agreement," it said, referring to the peace accords signed by Rabin and Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat.

Hecht's son, Rabbi Yehoshua Hecht, said, "I know of no apology being in the works right now, but we're hopeful it will be forthcoming, because he's a good man who is a lover of the Jewish people."

A spokesman at the Israeli Embassy in Washington said it is hard to imagine his government apologizing to Hecht.

"If someone has to apologize, it is Rabbi Hecht, for the words that he said," according to Gadi Baltiansky, the embassy's press counselor. "Hecht represents the incitement, and we, of Israeli society, paid a very high price when our prime minister was assassinated."

It was in June 1995 that Hecht said, at a discussion between rabbis that was open to the media, that by handing over Israeli land and property to Palestinians as part of the peace process, that Israeli leaders fell into the talmudic category of "moser," or people who betray Jews to gentiles. According to Maimonides, Hecht said then, according to JTA and other reports, such people deserve not only the death penalty, but should be killed before they can betray the Jewish people. In an interview from his winter home in Miami, Hecht denied ever having made those remarks.

He apologized in an October 1995 letter to Rabin, but was still isolated and then forced into retirement by his Orthodox congregation in Brooklyn, N.Y. □

Insurance firms to expedite claims

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — An international commission has been established to expedite the processing of insurance claims by Holocaust survivors and the heirs of victims.

The agreement to set up the commission was signed Wednesday in New York. Signatories include the state insurance commissioners of New York and California, four major European insurance companies and three Jewish organizations.

Participants called the agreement a "historic breakthrough." The commission, which will be composed of all the signatories, will have investigatory powers and will set up a mechanism to resolve conflicts between claimants and insurers.

The agreement also calls for establishing a fund to underwrite the commission's work and to provide humanitarian relief to families of Holocaust victims. □

Israeli Embassy threatened amid growing tension in Latvia

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — The Israeli Embassy in Latvia is the latest target of a campaign against the country's Jews.

The embassy, which is located in the Latvian capital of Riga, received a bomb threat Thursday that paralyzed the work of the mission for more than two hours, but no bomb was found.

The threat against the Israeli legation came one week after Riga's only synagogue was seriously damaged by a bomb.

Two senior Latvian security officials were dismissed after the bombing and the country's National Security Council recommended last Friday ousting the army's commander in chief, Juris Dalbins.

Dalbins had come under sharp criticism for participating in a march last month in Riga of Latvian Nazi SS veterans.

Some have linked the public activity of the veterans to recent violence against Jews, which also included the desecration of a Holocaust memorial in a Jewish cemetery.

On Thursday, Latvian President Guntis Ulmanis accepted Dalbins' resignation.

Meanwhile, the search for those responsible for the synagogue attack has been narrowed down to two individuals, police officials said.

The investigation, involving some 2,200 police officers, has been described as the largest in Latvia in 20 years. A total of 265 people were taken into custody, of whom 40 were wanted in connection with other crimes.

Many government buildings and religious sites in Riga are now under constant police surveillance.

Earlier this week, a land mine exploded outside the Russian Embassy in Riga. No one was hurt in Monday's attack, which Latvian police said they believed was linked to the synagogue bombing.

Latvian officials have said the attacks are aimed at complicating the Baltic nation's relations with the West and Russia.

Latvia, which is lobbying for membership in NATO and the European Union, has been at pains to avoid an international row over the recent incidents.

Ulmanis said in an interview last week that the SS veterans' march and synagogue bombing had badly damaged his country's image.

The Latvian leader said he feared that in two weeks his country had "lost all that it gained" in previous negotiations with the European body.

Recent incidents have further complicated already-strained relations between Riga and Moscow over Latvia's treatment of the 700,000-strong Russian-speaking minority living in the Baltic republic.

Russia has accused Latvia of treating its Russian minority as second-class citizens.

Most of the ethnic Russian and other non-Latvian speaking citizens were denied Latvian passports after the country gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.

To many Latvian nationalists, the Jewish community is associated with the Russian-speaking minority.

A significant portion of the 17,000-member Jewish commu-

nity in Latvia shares the citizenship problems of the country's Russian speakers.

The Jews, most of whom live in Riga, originally arrived in Latvia between 1940 and 1991, the years of the Soviet domination in the Baltic region.

Russian officials announced this week that defending Latvia's Jewish community is a Russian interest.

"We also seek to defend the interests of the [Latvian] Jewish community," Alexander Avdeev, Russia's deputy foreign minister, said Thursday. □

Russian politician launches hourlong anti-Semitic tirade

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — Russia's most famous anti-Semite appears to have outdone himself.

In an hourlong news conference in Moscow this week, ultranationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy blamed Jews for starting World War II, provoking the Holocaust, sparking the 1917 Bolshevik revolution in Russia — and destroying the country ever since.

"The essence of the conflict around the Jewish people is that when their number grows too much in a country, war breaks out there," he said.

Zhirinovskiy's anti-Semitism has drawn strong international condemnation for years, but this week's tirade was seen as probably his most blatant attack on Jews.

Asked why he called a news conference to share his views about Jews, Zhirinovskiy said, "Many Jews were born in April."

Zhirinovskiy's remarks come amid a period of political turmoil in Russia, in the wake of President Boris Yeltsin's dismissal of his Cabinet.

Some lawmakers have voiced concern about the possible Jewish roots of Yeltsin's nominee for prime minister, Sergei Kiriyenko.

Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democratic Party is the third largest faction in the Duma, Russia's lower house of parliament, where it holds 51 of the body's 450 seats.

While Zhirinovskiy maintains that his party is not anti-Semitic, his statements demonstrate otherwise.

"You will always find Jews where the war is raging because they realize that money flows where blood is spilled," he said at the news conference.

Zhirinovskiy said that the rise of Nazism in Germany on the eve of World War II was because "there were too many Jews."

He said that Jews were responsible for anti-Jewish violence and even the Holocaust.

"Jews themselves, Zionist leaders, often provoked anti-Jewish sentiments and Jewish pogroms," he said.

Rumors have circulated for years that Zhirinovskiy's anti-Semitism is a response to his own Jewish background — his father had a Jewish-sounding name.

The 52-year-old Zhirinovskiy has repeatedly denied his own Jewish roots.

He told a news conference last month that his "real" father was an ethnic Russian, as was his mother, and therefore he cannot be considered Jewish. □