



Daily News Bulletin

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81st Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Israel celebrates its jubilee

Israelis went to beaches, parks and picnic grounds to celebrate their two-day holiday marking Israel's 50th anniversary. But within Israel's fervently Orthodox community, where there is the belief that the Jewish state should not have been created until the coming of the Messiah, many refused to celebrate.

President Clinton wished Israel "mazel tov" in a letter congratulating the Jewish state on its jubilee. The letter spoke of the unique relationship between the two countries, adding that it would "endure just as Israel has endured." [Page 1]

Gore visits Israel

Vice President Al Gore began a two-day visit to Israel by focusing on Israel's future potential during a visit to the Weizmann Institute in Rehovot.

The vice president was one of the keynote speakers at the official Independence Day celebration later in the day. [Page 1]

House passes voucher bill

The U.S. House of Representatives passed legislation that would give tuition vouchers to some students in the District of Columbia for use at private and parochial schools. The Senate has already approved the measure, which would give \$3,200 to about 2,000 children from low-income families. President Clinton has promised to veto the bill, and congressional leaders say they lack the two-thirds majority needed to override his veto.

Britain poised to release list

Britain is reportedly set to release the names of 25,000 bank accounts from the Holocaust era that were confiscated by its government after the war. The World Jewish Congress said it was told the government would open a Web site that would make it possible to search for accounts by name, address or country.

Lithuania refuses to prosecute

Lithuania said it would not prosecute a Lithuanian national accused of helping the Nazis murder Jews. A U.S. federal judge ordered the deportation of Jonas Stelmokas, 82, a retired architect living in Pennsylvania. Lithuanian prosecutors said they had no evidence that the former Lithuanian platoon commander participated in war crimes. [Page 2]

ISRAEL AT 50

Gore joins Israeli festivities celebrating state's 50 years

By Matthew Dorf

JERUSALEM (JTA) — With a heavy dose of pomp and sentimentality, Vice President Al Gore joined Israel in celebrating its 50th anniversary.

Gore began his two-day visit to Israel by focusing on Israel's future potential during a visit to the Weizmann Institute in Rehovot. He then traveled on to Jerusalem, where he sought to put aside the troubled state of the peace process to focus on Israel's accomplishments.

After a sprint through Jerusalem for ceremonial visits at the president's and prime minister's offices, Gore made an afternoon speech to some 400 United Jewish Appeal donors. He told them that the trip was an "opportunity to proclaim with you, during a moment of deep importance for all humanity, our eternal commitment to Israel's security, prosperity and freedom."

But with U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright set to meet Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat next week in London, Gore could not escape the inevitable speculation that he would try to negotiate peace in scheduled meetings with the premier Friday and with Arafat the following day in the West Bank town of Ramallah.

But there were some who sought to downplay this speculation.

"The right thing for the vice president to do is to let the other people on the team do their jobs," said a senior administration official who stressed that Gore would not insert himself as a negotiator in the peace process.

Instead, Gore would encourage and listen to the parties, the official said.

Just the same, Gore's words of support for Israel's security were not lost on Israeli officials.

Turning to Netanyahu during an arrival ceremony in Jerusalem, Gore said that as Israel faces its next 50 years the most important truth is that "as Israel fulfills its destiny, the United States of America will never let you stand alone."

"The United States will stand side by side with you in your pursuit of security," he added.

Gore expanded on the theme during his remarks to the UJA donors. "Israelis want and deserve more security," he said. "They want peace, not just a peace process."

In his only comment directly referring to the Palestinians, Gore added, "That is why we have pressed the Palestinians for 100 percent efforts against terror and violence, 24 hours a day, seven days a week."

For the most part, Gore's day focused on the jubilee celebration. The most senior foreign dignitary to attend the day's festivities, Gore was a featured speaker at the extravaganza, "Jubilee Chimes," held Thursday night at a Jerusalem stadium.

In a speech there heavy on biblical references and Hebrew prayers, Gore invoked the story of how Joseph's brothers did not recognize him years after they had sold him to a passing caravan on its way to Egypt.

"If those who persecuted you, despised you and murdered you could see this glorious celebration tonight, would they even recognize you?" Gore said.

"I recognize you," he added. Calling America's ties to Israel "eternal," Gore drew loud cheers when he recited in Hebrew the Shehecheyanu — the prayer thanking God for "keeping us alive and sustaining us and enabling us to reach this day."

Netanyahu, who took the podium after him, thanked the United States for being

MIDEAST FOCUS

Israelis converge on Har Homa

Thousands of Israelis laid a symbolic cornerstone at the site of a controversial new Jewish neighborhood in southeastern Jerusalem.

Separated by a police line, hundreds of supporters of Peace Now held a counterdemonstration against any construction at Har Homa.

Airport named for Arafat

Palestinian officials officially named a still-unopened airport in the Gaza Strip after Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat.

The airport has remained closed because of disputes with Israel over security arrangements.

Former Turkish leader to be tried

A former prime minister of Turkey was ordered to stand trial in June on charges of insulting the country's judiciary. Necmettin Erbakan led the Islamist Welfare Party, which was banned in January.

Assad may visit France

Syrian President Hafez Assad may visit France in July, according to a French official. The visit is being linked to French efforts to have greater involvement in the peace process, particularly in Lebanon.

Vatican, Palestinians forge panel

The Vatican created a commission with the Palestinian Authority to advance bilateral cooperation. The Holy See established diplomatic relations with the Palestinian Authority in 1994, four months after it forged official ties with Israel.

JNF to publish list

The Jewish National Fund is expected in the coming weeks to publish for the first time a list of some 1,800 unclaimed parcels of land in Israel, most of which are believed to be owned by victims of the Holocaust.

Israel's partner in its "quest for security and peace." The two then sat back and enjoyed the show as fireworks lit the Jerusalem sky.

For the Israeli public at large, the festivities and partying began Wednesday evening, when the two-day Independence Day celebrations were ushered in with the blowing of rams horns and fireworks displays.

On Thursday, the holiday-making picked up where the previous night's dancing and celebrating left off, with Israelis going to beaches, parks and picnic grounds.

Along Tel Aviv's beaches, thousands of people gathered to watch the traditional navy display. The commander of the air force Maj. Gen. Eitan Ben-Eliahu, led a fly-by that included parachuting demonstrations. Despite the festive events, the political issues that have figured so prominently in day-to-day life were felt as well on Independence Day. Thousands of right-wing Israelis gathered Thursday to lay a symbolic cornerstone at the site of a controversial new Jewish neighborhood in southeastern Jerusalem.

Separated by a police line, hundreds of supporters of Peace Now held a counterdemonstration against any construction at Har Homa. The Palestinian Authority suspended negotiations with Israel more than one year ago after Israel began infrastructure work at the site.

To the consternation of the right-wing demonstrators gathered there on Independence Day, Netanyahu never authorized the start of housing construction.

Meanwhile, stepped-up numbers of security forces were stationed throughout the nation's large cities and at popular tourist sites. In a further security measure, Israel imposed a closure on the West Bank and Gaza Strip until the end of the two-day holiday. A discordant note also came from Israel's fervently Orthodox community, where there is the belief that the Jewish state should not have been created until the coming of the Messiah. Within the community, many refused to celebrate.

Tensions between observant and secular Israelis also surfaced at the Jubilee Chimes extravaganza. On Wednesday, representatives of the fervently Orthodox, or haredi, community, filed a petition at the High Court of Justice to prevent a modern dance performance that they considered immodest from being included in the extravaganza.

At issue was a number by the renowned Batsheva Dance Company during which the dancers strip down to their underwear.

Jerusalem Deputy Housing Minister Haim Miller said the performance offended the sensitivities of the haredi community and should be struck from the program.

The court rejected the petition, but jubilee organizers scrambled to reach a compromise with the artistic director of the performance. Officials from the premier's and president's offices were also enlisted to try to find a solution.

By Thursday night, the dance company decided to cancel its performance. Members of the troupe said that a compromise calling for the performers to wear tights and not strip down to their underwear had been made under political pressure. □

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

Lithuania refuses to prosecute

MOSCOW (JTA) — Lithuanian prosecutors have said they would not prosecute a Pennsylvania resident accused of war crimes.

They said there are insufficient grounds to prosecute Jonas Stelmokas, a former Lithuanian platoon commander accused of helping the Nazis massacre thousands of Jews. A U.S. federal immigration judge has ordered the deportation of Stelmokas, 82, a retired architect.

Stelmokas is accused of participating in Nazi atrocities in the ghetto of Kaunas, Lithuania's second largest city. He is also believed to have been a member of a battalion that murdered civilians, predominantly Jews, in both Belarus and Russia between 1941 and 1944. Stelmokas, who had his U.S. citizenship revoked three years ago, denies that he participated in any wartime crimes. Only one trial of a suspected war criminal has started in the Baltic region since the three Baltic nations — Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia — gained their independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.

That trial, of Aleksandras Lileikis, was adjourned a day after it began. Lileikis' trial is scheduled to resume later this month.

Some 94 percent of Lithuania's 240,000 Jews perished in the Holocaust. □



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JEWISH WORLD

Albright calls for more rights

U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright presented the president of China with a letter from President Clinton calling on China to increase its commitment to religious freedom and human rights. Albright met with Jiang Zemin during meetings in Beijing meant to prepare the ground for Clinton's planned visit to the Chinese capital in late June.

Bill aimed at Iran

U.S. Rep. Bob Menendez (D-N.J.) introduced legislation aimed at curbing Iran's attempts to develop a nuclear weapons program.

The bill would withhold U.S. annual contributions to the International Atomic Energy Agency for nuclear energy projects in Iran. Jewish groups, including B'nai B'rith, are urging lawmakers to support the bill.

Court rejects challenge

The Supreme Court rejected a challenge to a Minnesota school district's operation of a rural school rented from a religious sect and attended only by children of the sect's members. The justices turned away arguments that the arrangement violates the constitutional separation of church and state. The American Jewish Congress said it was disappointed with the court's decision not to take the case because it raises important questions about how far public schools should go in accommodating religion.

Swiss fire PR agency

Switzerland fired a public relations agency it had hired to improve the country's image in the wake of charges that it hoarded the wealth of Holocaust victims. The firing of Ruder Finn USA came after Swiss officials learned that the Israel branch of the agency was working for the World Jewish Restitution Organization, one of Switzerland's staunchest critics.

Insurer creates panel

A Swiss insurance company said it had set up an independent panel to review claims that it withheld life insurance policies from Holocaust victims or their heirs.

Zurich Group is one of several large European insurance companies being probed by U.S. insurance regulators and sued in a U.S. court over allegations that they withheld policies.

Jeffrey won't run

The woman who was hired and then fired by House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) as House historian decided not to run against him.

Christina Jeffrey was fired from the post following complaints that she had criticized the Education Department for not including the Nazi and Ku Klux Klan viewpoints in its Holocaust course.

Voucher bill passes House but unlikely to become law

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Congress' approval of a long-sought school voucher plan for the District of Columbia drew a mixed response from the Jewish community.

The House of Representatives on Thursday voted 214-206 in favor of the measure, which passed the Senate last year.

The legislation stands little chance of becoming law, however, because President Clinton has promised to veto it and congressional leaders say they lack the two-thirds majority necessary to override his veto.

Still, voucher proponents in the Jewish community hailed the bill's passage — the first time both houses of Congress have approved taxpayer-funded tuition vouchers for students to use at private or parochial schools.

Nathan Diament, director of the Orthodox Union's Institute for Public Affairs, said the move "shows that the momentum is with those who are committed to reforming our educational system and to providing parents with greater power and greater resources in guiding their children's education."

Jewish voucher opponents criticized the congressional action, calling it a bad development for public education and religious liberty.

"It's an unhappy day" when Congress allows itself to be diverted from "what has to be done to provide proper educational opportunities for children in the inner city in order to enact what amounts to a nostrum that is not going to work," said Richard Foltin, legislative director and counsel for the American Jewish Committee.

His group organized a letter to emphasize that a large part of the religious community opposes voucher proposals.

The letter was signed by 25 faith-based organization and sent to members of Congress this week.

Vouchers "represent the wrong remedy for the serious ills of America's public schools," the letter states.

"We believe vouchers will harm American public education to grave disadvantage of the most disadvantaged Americans and undermine the constitutional separation between church and state."

The so-called District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Act would give \$3,200 to about 2,000 children from low-income families for use at any private, parochial or public school in the Washington area.

The bill authorizes \$45 million to be spent over five years.

A similar plan was dropped last year because of White House opposition and another initiative failed in the previous Congress in 1996.

Advocates of the legislation see the D.C. voucher plan as a test run for vouchers on the national level.

Indeed, voucher proponents have turned their attention to the District of Columbia's failing schools in recent years in part because congressional support is lacking for a broad voucher program.

A proposal to enact a voucher plan to benefit students across the country died in Congress last year.

Opponents of vouchers object to the idea of using Washington, D.C. as a trial balloon.

"The congressional leadership has acted on their belief that D.C. is their own private testing ground, forgetting that what's not good for the country is also not good for D.C.," said David Harris, director of the American Jewish Congress' Washington office.

Diament offered another view.

"Perhaps Washington, D.C., is the place to do it because things can't get worse," he said.

If the plan is signed into law, "five years from now things are either going to be the same for D.C.'s children or better and we'll know whether vouchers work," Diament said. □

ISRAEL AT 50

Volunteers of 1948 war — 'Our souls burn with pride'

By Avi Machlis

SHA'AR HAGAI, Israel (JTA) — The slim 76-year-old from Queens, N.Y., doesn't look like a hero from Israel's War of Independence.

But in May 1948, Sidney Rabinovich risked his life to help the newborn Jewish state fight for its survival against invading Arab armies.

This week, he and another 500 elderly veterans of Machal — the Hebrew acronym for "Volunteers From Abroad" — reunited in Israel to honor the country they helped defend 50 years ago.

Old comrades-in-arms embraced, shared memories and posed for photographs together.

But this was not a typical reunion.

These veterans were not drafted.

Inspired by Zionism or compelled to help the Jews in pre-state Palestine after the horrors of the Holocaust, the veterans volunteered to fight in a war far from home in a unique ingathering of the exiles.

Some 3,500 people — including many non-Jews — from 37 countries ranging across the globe from Argentina to Australia came to help the nascent Jewish state in 1948. Of them, 119 were killed in action.

On Wednesday, when Israelis mourned its fallen soldiers, the volunteers gathered at the Machal memorial near Sha'ar Hagai, located in the foothills of Jerusalem, to honor their comrades who made the ultimate contribution to the state of Israel.

It is here that David Marcus, an American volunteer, suggested clearing a rocky path to Jerusalem that became known as the "Burma Road" and that was crucial to breaking the Arab siege of the city.

At Sha'ar Hagai on Memorial Day, the volunteers and their families stood in silence along with the rest of Israel.

Not far from here, at an area known as Latrun, Rabinovich fought on one of the fiercest fronts of the 1948 war.

He arrived in Palestine in April 1948, just one month before Israel declared independence.

Rabinovich had served in the U.S. Army, but many of the other volunteers had never held a gun. Training in the cash-strapped, fledgling army was barely existent.

"They gave us three bullets and a Sten gun," says Rabinovich. "That was it — we were soldiers."

Rabinovich and his U.S. buddies were put in an American squad in the 51st Battalion of Givati, the infantry unit.

They were dispatched to Latrun, where the army was trying to break through a stronghold that prevented Israel's fighters from reaching besieged Jerusalem.

"They put us in the front line because one of us was a former marine," says Rabinovich. "But we took a beating. Since we were up front, we had to run the farthest when we retreated."

Alfred Glassman was in Rabinovich's squad.

The 71-year old Bostonian remembers when the shelling began, instantly killing two volunteers from New York, Mandal Math and Jerry Kaplan.

"We never found the bodies," he says. "They were blown to

bits. There are two stones in their memory on Mt. Herzl," the military cemetery in Jerusalem.

After the Latrun battles, the squad was sent to the coastal town of Ashdod, where they helped fend off the Egyptian army's drive to reach Tel Aviv.

Volunteers had little time to orient themselves when they arrived, says Frank Rosenthal, who came from Sweden in March 1948 and fought in the Galilee alongside French, Belgian and Dutch volunteers under a Canadian commander. They communicated in English.

"When we came here, we didn't know anything," says Rosenthal, who proudly wears an Israel Defense Forces beret. "We had no idea where we were. The commanders told us, 'There are the Arabs. Shoot.' So we did."

Arne Budd, from Norway, fought alongside Rosenthal. He has numerous recollections of the Galilee battles, especially the night of September 6, 1948, when the unit was told to capture a hill near the northern town of Safed.

After nightfall, they plowed upward for 12 hours. In the morning, a bullet pierced Budd's neck. His commander carried him down the hill on his back, but there were few ambulances. A taxi was summoned to transfer Budd to the hospital.

Alfred Goldschmidt was 17 when he arrived from London. He came to Britain from Germany in 1939 as an 8-year-old boy. His parents perished in Auschwitz.

"After the war, when the state was declared, I felt I had to stand up and be counted," says Goldschmidt. "Israel couldn't fail. It had to go on because of what happened in Europe."

Unlike most volunteers, Goldschmidt chose to serve in a Hebrew-speaking unit, where he helped fight southward along the Negev border to capture Um Rashrash — a barren point on Israel's southern tip that would later become the thriving Red Sea resort town of Eilat.

Not all volunteers served on the front lines.

Nathan Frank and his wife, Martha, came from Mexico three weeks after they were married.

"We came here on our honeymoon," says the husband. They served in intelligence units, where he used his engineering skills and his wife — who is not Jewish — deciphered codes.

"I didn't know anything about Judaism," she says. "But I learned to love the country, its traditions and history."

Why did she agree to follow her new husband to a war in a distant land?

"I understood," she says simply.

There were more than a few non-Jewish volunteers who made crucial contributions to the struggle.

Thomas Derek Bowden, for example, was a British paratrooper captured by the Germans during World War II and placed in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.

He volunteered for Israel in 1948 and founded the army's paratroopers school.

"They didn't want any recompense," Kenyan-born Stanley Medicks says of the non-Jewish volunteers. "They came out of a desire to help the Jewish people."

Medicks served as an infantry platoon commander and founded the British and European Machal Association.

He sums up the veterans' feelings as they returned to the battle sites: "Some of us have lost our hair and some of us have put on weight," says Medicks, "but our souls burn with pride." □