



Daily News Bulletin

Vol. 76, No. 116

Monday, June 29, 1998

81st Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Netanyahu: 'Wide gaps' remain

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said "very wide gaps" remains on security issues between Israel and the Palestinians. Netanyahu made his remarks to Israel Television after earlier saying that he believed a decision would be made on a further Israeli redeployment from the West Bank by the end of July. But in remarks to Israel Radio, the premier added, "I can't say this for certain because I can't dictate what the Palestinians do."

Offer made on Swiss settlement

Jewish negotiators proposed that Switzerland pay \$1.5 billion to Holocaust victims to settle claims against Swiss banks, the Swiss government and the country's central bank. The offer was made during seven hours of indirect negotiations Tuesday at the State Department. The talks ended without agreement and without any date for a new session. The banks have said \$600 million is their best offer and did not immediately respond to the proposal from the Jewish side.

Clinton speaks out in China

President Clinton and U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright spoke about the importance of religious freedom while attending separate services at Protestant churches in Beijing. "As one who was a child in war-torn Europe," said Albright, "I'm convinced that the free exercise of those values can help sustain us all."

Swiss lawmakers protest

More than 100 members of the Swiss Parliament donated the equivalent of one-day's income to a private Swiss fund that helps Holocaust survivors. The \$20,000 gift was made in reaction to the Swiss government's decision last week to reject the claim for compensation by a survivor who was handed over to the Nazis by Swiss border guards. [Page 4]

Commandments law introduced

A U.S. congressman introduced legislation that would allow state and local governments to display the Ten Commandments on public property. The House of Representatives last year approved a resolution supporting such displays, but the Ten Commandments Defense Act, introduced by Rep. Robert Aderholt (R-Ala.), seeks to put the law behind the move.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Controversy second nature to U.S. Holocaust museum

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The leadership of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum has spent much of the past year trying to put out fires.

First it was the on-again, off-again invitation to Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat to visit the museum that brought on a wave of criticism and embarrassment.

Then it was the ouster of Walter Reich as the museum's director — another controversial move that provoked anger from his supporters, who believed he was being made a scapegoat for the Arafat debacle.

The most recent flare-up stems from the museum's decision to hire John Roth, an internationally renowned Holocaust scholar, to head the museum's new Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies.

In the past few weeks, the museum has been stung by a barrage of criticism from a handful of Jewish leaders, members of Congress and newspaper columnists over a 1988 article Roth authored, in which he compared Israeli policies toward the Palestinians to the Nazis' treatment of Jews, as well as other controversial writings.

As the 5-year-old museum navigates the highly sensitive and complex web of issues associated with its unique role, concern has arisen about whether the latest controversy — coupled with the year's other trials — will damage the image and the efficacy of the institution.

Many of those who care passionately about the museum are treading cautiously.

"My concern is that whatever merit there is to these particular arguments" about Roth, "one must be very careful not to hurt the museum itself," said Hyman Bookbinder, a longtime Jewish activist in Washington and a founding member of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council.

Sam Bloch, a vice president of the American Gathering of Holocaust Survivors, believes that the headlines of the past year have done just that.

"Anything of a controversial nature should be avoided," said Bloch, who personally opposed Roth's selection because he said he felt uncomfortable with politicizing the memory of the Holocaust.

"The institution is too dear to us. We have too much at stake," he said.

Some critics point to what they say is a pattern of bad decision-making by the museum's leadership. But museum leaders say that the same people who were most critical during the Arafat and Reich episodes are now engaging in a campaign to discredit the museum.

"I think the image of the museum is solid and positive in almost every corner of the country and even around the world," said Ruth Mandel, vice chair of the museum's council.

"This is a noisy eruption in a pretty small part of the population in the country."

Moving to put the Roth controversy behind them, the museum's governing body last week voted overwhelmingly to reaffirm the appointment of Roth, who is chairman of the philosophy and religious studies department at California's Claremont McKenna College.

The council also unanimously passed a resolution repudiating the "character assassination being waged against John Roth."

While some members admitted they were troubled by his decade-old analogy, most

MIDEAST FOCUS

Israeli youths charged

Two Israeli youths were charged with the killing of a Palestinian farmer earlier this month. The two teen-agers are suspected of having struck the 45-year-old farmer in the head with a wooden plank near the West Bank town of Hebron.

U.N. asks for damages

The United Nations General Assembly asked Israel to pay \$2.4 million for damage caused by a 1996 Israeli blast at a U.N. compound in southern Lebanon. One Israeli official called the request, which was made as part of a resolution to pay for the United Nations peacekeeping force in Lebanon, "ridiculous." The shelling was part of an Israeli attack against Lebanese fighters who had fired into Israel.

Terrorist cell uncovered

The Israeli army uncovered a Hamas military cell allegedly responsible for planning a bombing in the northern Israeli town of Afula. The army said six members of the Islamic fundamentalist group had been detained following bombings against Israeli patrols on roads linking West Bank settlements.

Israel holds gay pride parade

Some 1,500 people held what is believed to be the first gay pride march in Israel. Left-wing Knesset members, including Yael Dayan of Labor, Dedi Zucker of Meretz and Tamar Gozansky of Hadash, took part in the march. Labor Knesset member Eli Goldschmidt declared that "every Knesset member should have taken part in order to contribute to the transformation of Israel into a more liberal and democratic state."

Court orders release

An Israeli court ordered the release of a Lebanese man who was jailed without trial for seven years. But the court delayed the release of Ghassan Al-Dirani for 30 days to allow the state to appeal the ruling.



Daily News Bulletin

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JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN is published five days a week, except holidays, by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency Inc., 330 Seventh Ave., New York, N.Y. 10001-5010. For information about how to subscribe by e-mail, fax or regular mail, call (212) 643-1890, or visit our Web site at www.jta.org.
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were satisfied with Roth's apology and separated their reactions to his political views from their admiration of his scholarship.

In re-endorsing Roth, Mandel said she was concerned with "sending a strong message of support not only to him as an individual but to the scholarly community."

It was important, she added, to demonstrate the museum's commitment to academic freedom and to show the search for a director "was motivated by scholarly principles, and not by political ideology."

Privately, some members of the council said firing someone the museum had just hired might have proved too damaging to the institution's reputation and to its ability to attract future scholars.

Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League, cast a lone dissenting vote against re-endorsing Roth, while five other council members abstained.

Foxman was initially critical of Roth, then dropped his opposition when Roth apologized for the 1988 article.

But he said after reading another article by Roth, a 1983 piece titled "Irony in Israel" that compared Israel Defense Force actions to those of the Palestinians, he decided he could no longer support him.

"It's a moral equivalence which I don't think is defensible," Foxman said. "I personally don't think that with that mind-set he can do justice to the lessons of the Holocaust to future generations."

One of the most vocal critics of Roth's selection, Morton Klein, president of the Zionist Organization of America, has vowed to press forward with efforts to have him removed.

Without naming anyone specifically, Miles Lerman, chairman of the museum's council, and Mandel have suggested that Roth and the museum have become the objects of a "sustained campaign to damage the museum."

In a sharply worded letter to two members of Congress who raised objections to Roth's appointment, Lerman and Mandel wrote, "Some of our council members and staff believe these attacks have been orchestrated by individuals with personal agendas."

Indeed, a number of council members have said they believe Klein and other supporters of Reich have made it clear they have an ax to grind over the Arafat episode and Reich's ouster.

"Nothing could be more false than that charge," Klein said. "We would have identical concerns to this man's outrageous writing, whether the Arafat episode happened or didn't happen. That episode is completely irrelevant to John Roth's inappropriateness to this position."

For his part, Klein, a child of Holocaust survivors, said the best way for the institution to avoid damage to its reputation is to replace Roth with "someone who is qualified and understands the Holocaust properly."

Other observers suggest that the Roth controversy stems from a deeper problem.

"John Roth is not the issue. Governance is the issue," said Deborah Dwork, director of the Center for Holocaust Studies at Clark University in Worcester, Mass.

"What this series of problems would suggest is that perhaps it's time to look again at the way decisions are made and the way policies are formulated" at the museum.

She added that there is a "leadership vacuum" while the museum director's position remains unfilled. Sara Bloomfield is serving as acting director.

Although Foxman said the Roth controversy amounted to "a blip on the Holocaust museum's history," he voiced concern about the museum's repeated political problems.

"It's become a whipping boy for all kinds of people to play agendas, which I think is very troubling."

The museum has certainly been no stranger to clashing viewpoints over the years.

But Deborah Lipstadt, a professor of Holocaust studies at Emory University in Atlanta and a member of the museum's executive committee, said that if there are lessons to be drawn from recent months, it is "that sometimes doing the right thing doesn't win you friends or win you kudos but you do it anyway because in the long run it will stand."

Whatever short-term conflict may arise, she added, "Ultimately, you've got to weigh it against the 2 million people who come in the doors each year who aren't privy to any of this and who walk away profoundly influenced by what they see." □

JEWISH WORLD

Court rules on church-state case

The U.S. Supreme Court turned away a case brought by a former Jewish high school student involving alleged in-class religious activities in a Utah public school. The court, without comment, refused to revive Rachel Bauchman's federal lawsuit that accused a music teacher of violating her religious rights in 1995 by using his class to promote the Mormon religion. The ruling left Bauchman free to challenge the teacher's activities in state court.

Embassy law introduced

Legislation was introduced in Congress that would prevent the State Department from building a new U.S. Embassy in Berlin until construction is started on an embassy in Jerusalem. The 1995 Jerusalem Embassy Relocation Act requires the State Department to move the embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in 1999.

France pledges to survivors fund

France pledged to contribute about \$3.3 million to an international humanitarian fund set up last year to benefit Holocaust survivors. The contribution would come from part of France's share of residual Nazi gold remaining in the Tripartite Gold Commission's pool.

Swiss plaintiff accuses lawyer

The lead plaintiff in a class-action lawsuit of survivors seeking to regain Holocaust-era assets from Swiss banks accused her attorney of lying to his clients, according to the Associated Press. Gizella Weisshaus charged in letters sent to a federal judge in New York that Edward Fagan lied when he said that the lawsuit would be limited to claims from private individuals. Fagan said he believes Weisshaus is worried that Jewish groups working to receive the lost assets would end up with the money.

Comics editors apologize

Editors at DC Comics apologized for omitting any reference to Jews in the latest issue of "Superman." The story, which takes the hero back to the Holocaust, features victims with Jewish names who wear yarmulkas. DC Comics' president and editor in chief said the omission was a "mistake" which stemmed from a concern that young readers might repeat Nazi slurs against Jews and create a negative stereotype.

KKK holds rally in Texas town

The Ku Klux Klan held a rally in the Texas town where three white men allegedly dragged a black man to death behind a pickup truck earlier this month. Some 20 Klan members demonstrated, and 50 black activists held a counter-demonstration, in Jasper, Texas.

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

Reform Jewish leaders find potential for growth in Russia

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — American Reform Jewish leaders are optimistic about the potential for their movement's growth in the former Soviet Union.

A delegation of Reform leaders found, in visits this month to Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, that the number of congregations is growing steadily — and that there is an urgent need for trained rabbis.

"There are some students from these countries at the Leo Baeck College in London and Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem," said Jerry Tanenbaum, chairman of the North American Board of the World Union for Progressive Judaism. "They are coming back here soon to help establish a number of congregations."

There are more than 50 Progressive congregations — as the Reform movement is known here — in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Estonia.

In Russia alone, a dozen new Progressive congregations were registered in the past year.

Few of them have synagogue buildings or Torah scrolls. And only one — the Hatikva congregation in Kiev — enjoys the leadership of a full-time rabbi, David Wilfond, an American sent here last year by the WUPJ.

The 37 representatives of the WUPJ, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the National Federation of Temple Brotherhoods and the Women of Reform Judaism attended a graduation ceremony at the Institute for Modern Jewish Studies in Kiev. The institute, opened two years ago under the auspices of the WUPJ, is training young Jews from Ukraine's Reform congregations in the basics of Hebrew literacy and Jewish ritual.

The first group of 11 young men and women is now expected to return to their hometowns to share their newly gained knowledge.

Tanenbaum said the Reform movement is appealing in the former Soviet Union because many Jews are looking for pluralistic alternatives to the traditionally Orthodox congregations.

According to a recent poll, 22 percent of Russian Jews say they felt closest to Reform Judaism.

Some 4 percent said they felt more comfortable with Chasidism and about 2.5 percent favored Orthodoxy.

Many of those who are interested in Reform Judaism "are not halachically Jewish," said Tanenbaum, referring to the many Russian Jews whose mothers are not Jewish and who, therefore, are not considered to be Jews according to traditional Jewish law.

A large percentage of Jews in Russia are married to non-Jews, said Tanenbaum.

But, so far, the Reform movement has performed virtually no conversions in the former Soviet states.

"We don't want to make 'quickie' conversions," said Tanenbaum, referring to a term used recently by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who criticized the Reform movement's efforts to gain recognition for conversions their rabbis perform in Israel.

However, in coming years, Reform congregations here might get involved in preparing those non-Jews who want to convert, he said.

When the Russian Parliament passed a new religion law last September, some Jewish and human rights activists in the United States expressed concern that the law, which restricts religious freedom, could create problems for Reform Judaism here.

The law imposed a variety of restrictions on faiths that have not been active in Russia for at least 15 years. Judaism was recognized by the law as one of Russia's four "traditional" faiths that can enjoy full rights, but it was unclear how the law would be applied to Reform Judaism, which began in Russia only after the collapse of Communism.

"We had no indication from any person on the ground" that this law has created any problems for Reform communities in Russia, said Tanenbaum. □

Lithuanian president names liaison to Jewish community

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — The president of Lithuania has named his chief adviser to serve as the government's liaison to the Jewish community.

Simonas Alperavicius, chairman of the Lithuanian Jewish community, expressed cautious optimism in a telephone interview that the appointment of Julius Smulkstys could have a positive effect on Lithuanian-Jewish relations.

During the Nazi occupation of Lithuania from 1941 to 1944, approximately 94 percent of Lithuania's prewar Jewish community of 240,000 died in the Holocaust. Historians say the scale of the tragedy could have been smaller had ordinary Lithuanians not helped with the killings.

Jewish groups around the world have charged that the Lithuanian government has not adequately addressed that tragic period, including prosecuting alleged war criminals.

Indeed, the newly appointed presidential aide made a surprise announcement that the trial of Aleksandras Lileikis, originally slated to begin in March, had been postponed for the third time.

Lileikis, 91, headed the Lithuanian security police during World War II and is accused of having given Jews over to Nazi death squads.

Smulkstys gave no explanation for the delay, but said he and President Valdas Adamkus "regretted" that the case was "stalled till the fall."

The Simon Wiesenthal Center protested in a letter to Adamkus the decision to postpone the trial until Sept. 1. "It is obvious that such delays reflect negatively on the willingness of the Lithuanian authorities to try Mr. Lileikis," the center's Israel director, Efraim Zuroff, wrote.

After his appointment was announced last week, Smulkstys also called for a full investigation of what happened in Lithuania during the Nazi occupation.

Such an investigation would help counter the belief of Lithuanians that their countrymen did not participate in the mass killings during World War II.

The investigation, he said, also should help end the widespread belief in Lithuania that Jewish citizens collaborated with the Communists when the Soviet Union occupied the Baltic nation in 1940.

"The best way to solve the problems is to tell the truth," even if it is unpleasant," said Smulkstys, a former professor who taught in the United States. His academic interests include the history of the Holocaust in Lithuania. Smulkstys is a longtime friend of the Lithuanian president. They both recently returned to Lithuania after having lived in the United States since the end of the war. □

Swiss leaders narrowly reject refugee's compensation claim

By Fredy Rom

BERN (JTA) — Swiss Jewish leaders have sharply criticized a government decision to deny compensation to a Jewish refugee whom Swiss border guards handed over to Nazi Germany in 1943.

"The reaction of the government is not acceptable, especially because in 1943 the government knew exactly what is going to happen to those Jews returned to the Nazis," said Werner Rom, president of Zurich's Jewish community.

Joseph Spring, 71, who now lives in Australia, had demanded about \$67,000 in compensation from the Swiss government.

But the government said June 23 that while it deeply regretted the incident, Spring's claim had no legal basis.

Sources close to the government said the Cabinet vote was 4-3 against Spring's claim.

The main opponent was Foreign Minister Flavio Cotti, who voiced concern that a settlement would lead to demands from other Jewish survivors for compensation, a source said.

Last week, more than 100 members of the Swiss Parliament donated the equivalent of one-day's income to a private Swiss fund that helps Holocaust survivors. The \$20,000 gift was made in reaction to the government's decision to reject Spring's claim.

Switzerland expelled more than 30,000 Jews during the war, most of whom died.

At the same time, Switzerland provided refuge to about 25,000 Jews, who survived the war together with Switzerland's 20,000 Jewish citizens.

Spring had charged that in 1943 he was turned away at the Swiss border twice.

The first time, Swiss border guards sent him back to occupied France, but on the second occasion he and three others fleeing with him were handed directly over to the Germans.

In that second attempt to cross the Swiss border, Spring and his companions had false papers to mask their religion. But when they arrived in Switzerland, they showed their real papers, thinking that they would get asylum more easily as Jews.

After they were handed over to the Germans, they produced their false papers to avoid detection as Jews.

But German officials knew they were Jewish — because, Spring charges, the Swiss border guards gave the Germans their real identity papers. Spring was sent to Auschwitz, where he managed to survive the war.

Thomas Lyssy, vice president of the Swiss Jewish community, said the government's refusal to compensate Spring was "a moral disaster." □

Britain's Jews declining

LONDON (JTA) — Britain appears to be facing its own Jewish continuity crisis.

A new demographic study shows that Britain's Jewish population has dropped to less than 300,000 for the first time this century, and if current trends continue, the number of Jews is expected to fall to less than 200,000 within the next 25 years.

The study, conducted by the Board of Deputies of British Jews, the community's umbrella organization, is slated for publication in July. It shows there are now some 285,000 Jews in Britain, down from 308,000 a decade ago.

The largest erosion is caused by assimilation, with Jewish couples recording lower birth rates and the level of intermarriage now estimated to be running at some 44 percent.

Emigration to Israel accounts for the loss of some 800 a year, while an equal number of British Jews are believed to be emigrating to the United States each year. □