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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Arafat mulls suspending talks

Yasser Arafat said he was considering suspending peace talks with Israel because Israeli negotiators had brought nothing new to the latest round.

But Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu refuted the Palestinian leader's claim, saying Israel had presented "substantive" proposals at the talks. The U.S. State Department, meanwhile, called on Israel and the Palestinians to put "specific proposals" on the table in order to reach an agreement on a further Israeli redeployment from the West Bank.

Poland refuses to intervene

Poland's foreign minister said his government had no plans to intervene after the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem called for the removal of some 50 crosses erected outside the site of the Auschwitz death camp.

Bronislaw Geremek indicated that the government would leave the issue to the Polish Catholic Church. Church officials said they have no plans to deal with the crosses, erected last month by a Catholic workers group as part of a campaign to maintain Christian symbols at the site.

Family sues for Matisse painting

A Jewish family filed suit in a U.S. federal court to recover an Henri Matisse painting that was confiscated by the Nazis in 1941.

The Seattle Art Museum asked the heirs of Paul Rosenberg to file the suit in order to help it reach a comprehensive settlement with the art dealer who purchased "Odalisque" in 1954, according to the family's lawyer. The painting's provenance was discovered last summer, when a grandchild of the couple who donated the Matisse to the museum recognized it in a book on Nazi-plundered art.

Volkswagen may face suit

A class-action lawsuit may be filed against Volkswagen next month on behalf of former slave laborers forced to work for the company during World War II. Melvin Weiss, a New York-based lawyer who has filed lawsuits on behalf of other wartime slave laborers, told a German newspaper that the compensation fund announced recently for former slave laborers by Volkswagen is insufficient. [Page 4]

NEWS ANALYSIS

Israelis perplexed by reaction of Labor Party to member's slurs

By David Landau

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The outrage expressed by the Labor Party in recent days over ethnic slurs made by a senior member of their ranks may have been less than sincere.

And just possibly, the criticism heaped by party colleagues on Knesset member Ori Orr — who made disparaging remarks about Moroccan Israelis in a newspaper interview — may have been meant for Orr's longtime friend and close political mentor, opposition leader Ehud Barak.

For several months, some Labor members have expressed discontent regarding Barak's apparent inability to increase his popularity and exploit Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's apparent weaknesses.

The dismay in Labor, moreover, appeared in many cases to focus more on the anticipated damage to the party caused by Orr's remarks than on the way he may have insulted a segment of Israeli society.

A retired major general, Orr was quoted in the Israeli daily Ha'aretz last week as saying that Moroccan Jews are the "most problematic ethnic group."

He added that Moroccan Jews in Israel "have no curiosity to know what's happening" and that they interpret legitimate criticism as ethnically motivated.

Barak — who last year publicly apologized for the suffering Middle Eastern and North African Jews endured in the early years of the state, which was run at the time by Labor's precursor, the Mapai Party — later said it would take a long time to mend the damage Orr had caused the party.

Orr, who apologized for his remarks, refused to resign from the Knesset, but the party forced Barak to strip him of all his leadership positions.

Legislator Haim Ramon, a key party figure, said he would quit the party if Orr were elected in the next primaries to Labor's Knesset list.

Barak, badly bruised from the Orr affair, is in the United States this week with three senior members of the Labor Party.

The trip is an effort to raise the party's profile among Clinton administration officials and American legislators.

The delegation met with the U.S. assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, Martin Indyk, and about a dozen members of Congress.

The U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and President Clinton's national security adviser, Sandy Berger, planned to host the group at separate meetings before they return to Israel.

The Center for Middle East Peace and Economic Cooperation and the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations also planned to host the Labor party leaders at separate receptions.

In his meetings with American lawmakers, including members of the House International Relations Committee, Barak hoped to woo support for his brand of peacemaking.

Barak made a point of showing that his vision of peace talks with the Palestinians stands in sharp contrast to Netanyahu's vision.

"We can see through the fog that we are heading toward a collision," he said Tuesday.

"We are trying to warn against it," he said. Speaking a day earlier to a small group

MIDEAST FOCUS

Barak calls for progress

Israel's opposition leader called for progress in the peace talks even though the Palestinians have not fulfilled all of their obligations under the peace accords.

"We should be careful not to make any single element of the puzzle an excuse to destroy the whole situation," Ehud Barak told reporters during a four-day American visit.

Barak, who is accompanied by three senior members of the Labor Party, is scheduled to hold separate meetings this week with U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and National Security adviser Sandy Berger.

Romanian premier visits Israel

Romania's prime minister vowed during a visit to Israel that he would back legislation to return to Jews property that was confiscated during and after World War II.

Radu Vasile met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who praised his Romanian counterpart's sensitivity toward Jews.

The World Jewish Restitution Organization estimates that there are thousands of communal properties and as many as hundreds of thousands of private properties owned by Jews in Romania that were confiscated by the Nazis and by the postwar Communist government.

Israel marks 'Aliyah Day'

Some 1,000 immigrants arrived in Israel from 12 different countries as part of the Jewish state's "Aliyah Day" ceremonies.

Among the immigrants were 140 from the United States, 150 from Uzbekistan, 90 from Romania and 45 from Britain.

The airlift was planned by the Jewish Agency for Israel as part of the country's 50th anniversary celebrations.



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of reporters, Barak left the door open for the retired Army officer to return to good graces in the Labor Party if he performed "long hard work in those very communities" that he offended.

Israeli observers, meanwhile, note that the Labor Party's criticism of Orr was far more vehement than the reaction in the country at large — or in Sephardi communities themselves.

Even among Moroccan Israelis, the primary target of Orr's remarks, people have been taken aback at the vehemence of Labor's reaction.

Indeed, the Moroccan community's own reaction, by and large, has been a contemptuous "so what" — and certainly lacked the intensity of the Labor Party's breast-beating.

This is not to say that Moroccan Jews in Israel do not harbor resentments over what they almost uniformly insist was the discriminatory treatment they received at the hands of the Ashkenazi establishment when their families came to Israel in the 1950s and early 1960s.

But decades have elapsed since then.

And while some profound social problems created by the mass immigration during the Jewish state's early years remain unsolved — Israeli society has made great strides toward ethnic cohesion.

Social, cultural and ethnic mobility are facts of Israeli life. Israelis on both sides of the Ashkenazi-Sephardi divide are comfortable with these facts and want them accelerated.

There is not the same naive zeal for Zionism as a great melting pot that existed during Israel's early years.

As in other multiracial and multiethnic societies the world over, there is greater respect now for cultural diversity.

It is true that Sephardi activists have had to wage a hard fight for this respect.

But the need that still exists in some areas to fight for ethnic separatism, even autonomy, need no longer create a state of permanent tension among the various sectors of society.

This logic leads to the conclusion — and many Israelis this week are reaching it for themselves — that politicians may have an interest in perpetuating the old ethnic sores that the public views, or wants to view, as healed.

A columnist in the Israeli daily Yediot Achronot noted that "Israeliness" — the quality that Orr claimed the Moroccans lack — is in fact an evolving amalgam of diverse Ashkenazi and Sephardi cultural strands.

Another writer, the Hebron settler leader Elyakim Haetzni, recalled that "Ostjude," or Eastern Jews, was the derogatory term that German Jews used to apply to Polish and Russian Jews — the very same Jews who, in today's Israeli context, are purportedly disparaging the country's Sephardim.

At the end of the day, some social observers maintain, it is the Labor Party's vehement reaction against Orr — rather than the Sephardi reaction or, for that matter, Orr's comments themselves — that heightens the risk of stirring new ethnic tension within Israeli society.

By the same token, Labor's reaction, while ostensibly expressing sensitivity as well as contrition, in fact reflected a lack of empathy and a one-dimensional understanding of a society in flux.

The same might be said of Netanyahu's reaction.

On July 29, the day Orr's remarks appeared in Ha'aretz, Netanyahu made a rare and unplanned Knesset appearance to squeeze every drop of rhetorical capital out of Labor's discomfort.

But while it won some cheap plaudits, that, too, may prove not to have gone over well with the general public.

Indeed, many in Likud declined to repeat their leader's references to the number of Sephardi ministers in his Cabinet and the fact that the new army chief of staff is Sephardi.

They, perhaps better sensing the mood, preferred to leave such head-counting to the bad old times — or to a battered and disconsolate Labor. □

(JTA correspondent Matthew Dorf in Washington contributed to this report.)

JEWISH WORLD

March planners issue threat

Organizers of the Million Youth March are threatening to hold the event in Brooklyn's Crown Heights neighborhood if New York City officials continue to deny a permit to march in Harlem.

Jewish residents have flooded the mayor's office with alarmed phone calls, fearing a fresh outbreak of violence should the September march take place in Crown Heights, home to a large Chasidic population and the site of anti-Semitic riots in 1991.

Modeled after the 1995 Million Man March in Washington, the event is being spearheaded by former Nation of Islam spokesman Khalid Abdul Muhammad.

Muhammad's inflammatory, anti-Semitic remarks have been condemned by both houses of Congress.

Swiss bank plans gold study

Switzerland's central bank plans to publish its own study of gold transactions it engaged in with Nazi Germany.

The move comes following studies in recent months which concluded that the Swiss National Bank did not do enough to ensure that it did not buy looted gold from Nazi Germany.

Holocaust survivors last month filed a lawsuit against the central bank.

Foundation calls for museum

A newly formed foundation in Germany is reviving calls for a Holocaust museum there.

The initiative comes as controversy continues regarding a proposed national Holocaust memorial in Berlin.

Meanwhile, a documentation center focusing on the crimes of the Nazi SS is scheduled to open in two years in Berlin.

Theater to open in Cologne

A Jewish theater is planning to open its doors in December in the German city of Cologne.

The new theater is expected to perform two-thirds of its plays in German, with the remainder to be in Yiddish.

Germany currently has one Jewish theater, located in the Western town of Bensheim.

Jew wins tae kwon do trials

A Jewish man from Houston placed first in the trials for the U.S. tae kwon do Olympic team.

A national champion in the Korean martial art, George Weissfisch, 28, will also represent the United States at the Pan American Tae Kwon Do Championships slated for December in Lima, Peru.

The next summer Olympics will be held in the year 2000 in Sydney, Australia.

Jewish Holocaust survivor appointed to Czech Cabinet

By Richard Allen Greene

PRAGUE (JTA) — One of Czechoslovakia's new deputy prime ministers has traveled a perilous path to power.

When Egon Lansky, then Egon Lowy, was 5, his father, a doctor, fled to England after Hitler's troops invaded Czechoslovakia in 1939.

Meanwhile, when the Jews of his hometown of Trencin were rounded up for deportation in 1944, Lansky's mother, also a doctor, feigned medical problems. She and her children were transferred to a local hospital, where sympathetic former colleagues kept them as long as they could.

The family was eventually deported to Auschwitz, but survived.

Now, as deputy prime minister for European integration, Lansky will have, as his primary responsibility, preparing the country for possible membership in the European Union.

But he will also have to steer his party and his country to a smoother relationship with Germany.

Lansky is the only Jewish member of the incoming Cabinet, which was sworn in July 22. But there is strong Jewish representation in the Czech Foreign Ministry. Deputy Foreign Minister Otto Pick is Jewish, for example.

Lansky's involvement with the Czech Jewish community includes membership in an organization called Beit Praha, the Open Jewish Community, which was set up by American Jewish expatriates with the help of the World Union for Progressive Judaism to provide an alternative to the official Orthodox community here.

Back in Trencin after the war, the Lowys changed the family name to Lansky, a less Jewish-sounding name to Czech ears, to escape anti-Semitism.

Lansky, now 64, was later thrown out of three universities for anti-Communist activities. He moved to Sweden after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia that ended that year's Prague Spring reform movement.

In Sweden, where he took citizenship, he earned degrees in journalism and politics. He became known as a conservative political columnist and also worked for the BBC in London and as a political commentator for Radio Free Europe.

Lansky returned to Czechoslovakia after the Velvet Revolution brought down communism in 1989.

He became a spokesman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and then was appointed ambassador in the Czechoslovak permanent mission to the Council of Europe.

When Czechoslovakia dissolved into the Czech Republic and Slovakia at the end of 1992, Lansky took Czech citizenship and worked as a journalist before he became a press spokesman for the leader of the Social Democratic Party, Milos Zeman.

Czech President Vaclav Havel asked Zeman to form a new government after the Social Democrats took a third of the popular vote in parliamentary elections in June.

Lansky joined the party after he ran for the Czech Senate as an independent in 1996 and won convincingly.

"You cannot be a conservative in the Czech Republic if you want to be a decent person," he said.

"The right wing here does not have what the Tories in Britain, for example, have: compassion." □

Pro-violence CD sold in Germany

BERLIN (JTA) — A compact disc being distributed in Germany contains lyrics that call for the deaths of the country's politicians.

Officials say the lyrics, which were aired recently on a German public-television program about neo-Nazi propaganda, are among the most violent anti-government sentiments ever expressed in popular music. □

Holocaust survivors attend opening of former Nazi's trial

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK (JTA) — It was clear that Jakob Reimer would have preferred to be somewhere else.

Reimer, the first former Nazi to face a denaturalization proceeding in a Manhattan federal court, spent most of the first day of his trial picking at his fingernails and at the blue cardigan sweater he wore over a white shirt buttoned to the neck.

The Justice Department's Office of Special Investigations, the department's Nazi-hunting unit, is seeking to strip Reimer of his U.S. citizenship because, it charges, he lied about his wartime killing of Jews in Poland when he applied for a U.S. visa in 1952.

The trial, which opened Monday, is expected to last about two weeks.

If Judge Lawrence McKenna rules in favor of denaturalization, then the Justice Department will initiate legal action to deport Reimer.

Several Holocaust survivors, some wearing replicas of the yellow stars they were forced to wear by the Nazis to identify them as Jews, were among the many observers who packed the federal courtroom.

"We are here because we are interested to see who killed our people," said Fira Stukelman, a board member of the Association of Holocaust Survivors From the Former Soviet Union, who said her parents were murdered by the Germans.

Zhanna Berina, a vice president of the survivors group, said, "We're not young, but we have the task to tell what happened" in Eastern Europe during the war that "people don't really know about."

The trial also has attracted younger observers, among them 19-year-old Ahuvah Weinberger, who recently returned from a tour of destroyed Jewish towns and concentration and death camps in Poland.

"After seeing the destruction, it seemed important to come to show that we still care," said Weinberger.

Prosecutors have charged that Reimer, now 79 and frail, did not state on his visa application that he had been in the Polish cities of Lublin, Czestochowa or Warsaw. Each of those cities had a Jewish ghetto that prosecutors say Reimer had a hand in "liquidating."

Reimer "misrepresented and concealed the most essential information about his wartime conduct in order to gain admission to the U.S.," Edward Stutman, the lead prosecutor, said in his opening argument.

"The defendant led many actions against Jews and took part in the very first liquidation of a ghetto, in March 1942, when 26,000 Jews were deported from Lublin."

Just more than a year later, in April 1943, Reimer and the Trawniki squad, a Nazi SS unit, "led the destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto."

Reimer has admitted that he was a member of the Trawniki squad, but denies that he was directly involved in the mass murder of Jews.

In his opening argument, defense attorney Ramsey Clark provided an outline of Reimer's life story. He gave extensive detail about the Mennonite faith, which was strong in the Ukrainian town

where Reimer was born to German parents in 1918.

Reimer served in the Soviet army, was taken a prisoner of war by the Germans and then was handpicked to be a member of the Trawniki squad because he spoke German, said Clark.

In a sworn statement to OSI investigators made in 1992, Reimer said that he had shot dead the only living man who was nearly buried in a pit of more than 50 corpses just outside of Trawniki.

Reimer did not have a lawyer present at that interview.

But last year, Reimer retracted that statement, saying instead that he had fired over the pit after he was ordered to shoot by his Nazi superior.

"Saying he changed the trajectory of his bullet does not diminish his role," said Stutman.

"He was armed and in command, and that makes him part of the system of persecution." □

N.Y. attorney threatens to sue Volkswagen over slave laborers

By Deidre Berger

FRANKFURT (JTA) — A class-action lawsuit may be filed against Volkswagen next month on behalf of former slave laborers forced to work for the company during World War II.

Melvin Weiss, a New York-based lawyer who has filed lawsuits on behalf of other wartime slave laborers, told the German newspaper Die Tageszeitung earlier this week that the compensation fund announced recently for former slave laborers by the German auto manufacturer is insufficient. He claims that the company is only prepared to pay small sums to its former slave laborers.

Volkswagen made its announcement in June, shortly after it became known that German lawyer Klaus von Muenchhausen planned to file a suit in German courts against the company on behalf of 30 clients living in Israel.

Earlier this year, Weiss filed a suit in a U.S. court against Ford to press compensation claims from former slave laborers during WWII at a Ford subsidiary in the German town of Cologne.

Weiss, who claims to represent Jewish and non-Jewish clients in numerous countries, said he plans to file more suits against German companies.

"We want to file lawsuits against 10 to 15 companies — all the large enterprises that used slave labor," he said.

It is unclear which, if any, of these cases will be accepted by U.S. courts. But German companies have said in the past that they fear the negative publicity that could result from such lawsuits.

After Volkswagen announced it would pay limited compensation to former slave laborers, the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany called on other German companies to make similar moves.

The organization is also pressing for the resolution of claims against German insurance companies and banks that profited from Holocaust victims.

The German government made compensation payments to slave laborers for their imprisonment and for health damages, but has refused to pay back wages. German firms have generally also refused to pay back wages, saying that these were the government's responsibility. □