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81st Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Ross to visit Middle East

U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross is returning to the region next week to advance the long-paralyzed Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, the White House said.

The planned trip comes amid conflicting statements from the two sides over whether progress has been made in the talks. Palestinian officials are disputing Israeli claims that an agreement is near.

Senate backs aid bill

The U.S. Senate overwhelmingly approved next year's annual foreign aid bill. For the first time since the 1978 Camp David Accords, the 1999 Foreign Operations Appropriations Act reduces aid to Israel and Egypt.

In line with an Israeli proposal, the bill would give the Jewish state \$50 million less than its traditional \$3 billion civilian and military aid package. The House Appropriations Committee plans to take up its version of the bill next week.

Lawyers discuss settlement

Ten lawyers called a news conference to answer Holocaust survivors' questions about when they could expect payments from a recent \$1.25 billion settlement involving Switzerland's leading banks.

The lawyers in the case said they plan to reach out to survivors through newspaper ads to get their input about how distributions should be made. While telling survivors to have confidence in the restitution process, they said payments from the settlement could take between one and four years.

UJA mission meets pope

A United Jewish Appeal mission from Chicago thanked Pope John Paul II for furthering Jewish-Catholic relations and encouraged him to visit Israel soon. But during their half-hour private audience with the pope, the Jewish leaders did not raise any issues clouding Jewish-Catholic relations, such as the ongoing tensions over the erection of crosses near the Auschwitz death camp by Polish Catholic fundamentalists. [Page 2]

Because of the Labor Day holiday, the JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN will not be published Monday Sept. 7.

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

Russia commemorates role of Jews during World War II

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — Organizers had scheduled the dedication of a synagogue and a museum devoted to the history of Russian Jewry for this week in the hope that President Clinton would show up.

But Clinton, who was here for a two-day summit, did not attend the ceremony.

Some sources said he wanted to avoid a possible conflict with a rival group of Jewish leaders who wanted him to pay a visit to a Moscow synagogue that was bombed in May.

While the U.S. president failed to appear at Wednesday's historic event at Russia's World War II memorial complex, a leader whose problems are much greater did attend.

Russian President Boris Yeltsin made a surprise appearance, joining Russian and world Jewish leaders, war veterans, city officials and a few U.S. senators for the dedication of the modern-style synagogue built to commemorate Soviet Jews who died during the war. Some 500,000 Jews fought in the Red Army during World War II, which is usually referred to in Russia as the Great Patriotic War. About 200,000 of them died on the battlefield.

Yeltsin's participation marked the first time that one of Russia's top leaders had openly acknowledged the role of Jewish soldiers in the war.

In his speech at the ceremony, Yeltsin paid tribute to the hundreds of thousands of Soviet Jews who perished then and stressed the need for religious unity.

"We have a common motherland — Russia. Christians and Muslims, Jews and Buddhists, believers and non-believers, we have always been together and this is where our strength is."

Jewish leaders said they were pleased that Yeltsin found the time to participate in the solemn ceremony despite Russia's deepening economic and political crisis — and despite the possible reaction of ultra-nationalists.

"Yeltsin made a very brave statement by attending the ceremony," said Mikhail Chlenov, president of the Va'ad, an umbrella organization for Jewish groups in Russia.

Yeltsin was not the only Russian leader to appear.

Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov presented the new synagogue with a 19th-century Torah scroll.

Luzhkov sported a black velvet yarmulke and spiced his emotional speech with Hebrew words such as "shalom" and "mazel tov."

The mayor, who had supervised the construction of the synagogue, called its opening a "realization of a longtime dream of Russian and world Jewry."

A close friend of media mogul Vladimir Goussinsky, Luzhkov hailed the Jewish contribution to Russia's culture and economy and called Moscow's Jewish community "probably the most distinguished" minority in the Russian capital.

Goussinsky, the president of the Russian Jewish Congress, underwrote much of the construction of the synagogue, which cost an estimated \$12 million.

Natan Sharansky, a former refusenik who is now Israel's trade and industry minister, also addressed the hundreds of guests at the ceremony.

Sharansky used an example from his experience in a Soviet gulag to discuss the importance of religious tolerance — even amid repression. He recalled how he shared a prison cell with one Orthodox Christian activist.

"He had a New Testament, I had a Book of Psalms. When either of our books were

MIDEAST FOCUS

Israel hit by strike

Some 300,000 Israeli workers went on strike, shutting down phone and electric companies, government offices and courts.

Ben-Gurion Airport, banks and the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange are not affected by the strike, which is over pay increases. Meanwhile, a strike by school teachers reached its third day.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has called on some public-sector employees to forgo a salary increase, saying he and the finance minister had already decided to do so.

Preliminary budget unveiled

Israel's defense spending will increase some \$26 billion next year even as cuts are planned in the rest of the country's budget.

The preliminary 1999 budget, which was unveiled by the Finance Ministry, is slated to be debated next week by the Cabinet.

Spy allowed home

An Israeli court allowed an aging spy to spend the rest of his 20-year prison sentence at home. Marcus Klingberg, 80, has already served 15 years on charges of spying for the former Soviet Union.

The court ruled that he had been punished for his crimes and that it was time to show understanding for his state of health.

ZOA issues report

The Zionist Organization of America issued a report detailing what it views as the consistent pattern of Palestinian non-compliance with the Oslo accords since the first Israeli-Palestinian agreement was signed five years ago.

"Five Years of Palestinian Arab Violations of the Oslo Accords" includes sections on Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's anti-Israel rhetoric and instances of Holocaust-denial by other Palestinian officials.



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confiscated, we went on a hunger strike together," Sharansky said.

In addition to the synagogue, the park on Memorial Hill also has a Russian Orthodox church and a mosque.

To preserve the memory of the 6 million Jews who died in the Holocaust and to teach the younger generation of Russians about the catastrophe — which remains virtually unknown to many here — the synagogue includes Russia's first-ever permanent Holocaust exhibition.

The synagogue will be used as a house of prayer only on holidays. But the building will be open year-round to visitors interested in the accomplishments and tragedy of Russian Jewry.

Jewish war veterans said the opening of the synagogue and museum would correct some popular historical inaccuracies in Russia.

"The myth that Jews did not fight at the front created by Stalin is widespread today," said Moisei Maryanovsky, chairman of the Union of Jewish War Veterans and Invalids.

"The synagogue will help to dispel this untruth." □

Chicago delegation is first UJA group to meet with pope

By Ruth E. Gruber

ROME (JTA) — Pope John Paul II has often met with Jewish groups, but this week marked the first time that he received a delegation from the United Jewish Appeal.

In a half-hour private audience Thursday, the UJA mission from Chicago thanked the pope for his work in furthering Jewish-Catholic relations and encouraged him to visit Israel soon.

But they did not raise any issues clouding Jewish-Catholic relations, such as the ongoing tensions over the erection of crosses near the Auschwitz death camp by Polish Catholic fundamentalists.

The pontiff called the meeting, which took place at his summer residence at Castel Gandolfo, south of Rome, "another step in the direction of strengthening the spirit of understanding between Jews and Catholics."

"For the good of the human family, it is crucial at this time that all believers work together to build structures of genuine peace," he added.

The delegation included some 20 members of the UJA's Chicago Prime Minister's Mission, headed by Steve Barnett, chairman of the 1999 campaign of the Jewish United Fund of Metropolitan Chicago.

Participants called the meeting "personal and special" — but they observed that the pontiff appeared frail.

Carole Solomon, UJA national campaign chairman, flew from New York for the audience.

"It was an extraordinary experience," she told JTA. "Very moving."

She termed the meeting "historic" in that it "recognized the validity and power" of what the UJA represents.

In his remarks to the pope, Barnett emphasized that in Chicago, which has a large Catholic population, "the cultivation of positive relations between Catholics and Jews is held in especially high regard.

"Together, our two communities strive to look honestly at the past and to forge fruitful relations based on mutual understanding and respect," he said.

"These are goals which we know have been the hallmark of your leadership. We are grateful for your commitment to healing wounds from the past and for reaching out to the Jewish people as you have," he said.

The pope has made clear that he wants to visit the Holy Land before or during the year 2000, when Christianity celebrates its millennium.

Encouraging him to make the trip, Barnett said such a visit would be a "historic event of profound meaning to both of our peoples and to the entire world."

During their four-day visit to Italy, the UJA group also met with representatives of the Rome Jewish community, Italian government officials and Rome's mayor. □

JEWISH WORLD

Poland to seek camps legislation

The Polish government said it would seek legislation to preserve former Nazi death camps located on its territory.

The legislation, to be presented to Parliament by the end of the year, would give the camps a special "memorial" status and set up management councils, according to a government spokesman.

The bill is at least partly directed at protecting Auschwitz from a crusade by fundamentalist Polish Catholics, who recently erected more than 150 crosses in defiance of Jewish demands that no religious symbols be displayed there.

Report: Nazis created 'J' stamp

Nazi Germany came up with the infamous "J" stamp in Jews' passports to prevent them from fleeing to wartime Switzerland, a Swiss magazine reported.

Reversing its original story from 45 years ago, The Observer said recent research indicates that Swiss authorities did not initiate the idea, but approved it when proposed by Nazi officials. The original story, which put the blame squarely on the Swiss, was based on documents made available by the Allies.

Synagogue may use armory

New York Gov. George Pataki ordered a state of emergency to allow the congregation of the Central Synagogue to use an armory in New York City for High Holiday services.

The Reform synagogue in Manhattan was heavily damaged last week by fire. Plans are currently under way to rebuild the shul.

U.N. tribunal praised

An international court found the former mayor of a central Rwandan city guilty of the slaughter and rape of more than 2,000 victims by police, soldiers and Hutu militiamen under his authority.

Harris Schoenberg, director of U.N. affairs for B'nai Brith, said of the ruling against Jean-Paul Akayesu by the U.N.'s International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, "This judgment is a testament to the collective determination of the U.N. member states to confront the heinous crime of genocide in a way that they have never done before."

Germany to honor Spielberg

Director Steven Spielberg will receive Germany's Cross of the Order of Merit for "Schindler's List."

The honor recognizes the 1993 film's powerful effect in generating a broader understanding of the Holocaust.

President Roman Herzog is expected to present the award to the director in a Sept. 10 ceremony in Berlin.

International Jewish group readies response to pope's Shoah document

By Julia Goldman

NEW YORK (JTA) — An international group of Jewish interreligious affairs experts is set to issue a critical response to the Vatican's statement on the Catholic Church's role during the Holocaust.

The response from the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations would not be the first Jewish reaction to the document, but it does represent the first formal comment by a coalition of Jewish groups that interacts regularly with senior church officials.

A draft of IJCIC's response to Rome, scheduled to be released later this week, says that by calling the Holocaust a major fact in the history of the century, the Vatican's document "should render impossible the obscenity of Holocaust denial among Catholics and we see in this one of the major positive aspects of the document."

The long-awaited Vatican document, "We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah," received a mixed report when it was issued in March.

"Fifty, 75, 100 years from now, there can never be any doubt that the Holocaust took place, because here is a definitive statement from the Catholic Church by a pope from Poland," Rabbi A. James Rudin, the interreligious affairs director of the American Jewish Committee and a member of IJCIC, said in an interview this week.

But IJCIC's nine-page response enumerates a host of problems with the Vatican statement, ranging from claims that the document minimizes the connection between church doctrine and anti-Semitism to charges that the Vatican lionizes Pope Pius XII for saving "hundreds of thousands of Jewish lives" without providing sufficient documentary evidence to support this claim.

IJCIC's members include representatives from the three main branches of Judaism, the Israel Interfaith Committee and some major Jewish organizations, among others.

Immediately following the document's release in Rome, IJCIC members articulated their reactions directly to church representatives during a meeting at the Vatican of the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee. IJCIC representatives say they do not expect the Vatican to respond to their statement. The next meeting of the liaison committee is scheduled for the year 2000. Until then, Jewish leaders say they hope Catholic churches, schools, universities and seminaries will use "We Remember" to bolster Holocaust education among the world's 1 billion adherents of Catholicism. □

Holocaust survivors sue German firms

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — German companies that helped fuel the Nazi war machine have been hit with two class-action lawsuits.

Holocaust survivors filed lawsuits this week against some of Germany's biggest and best-known companies, alleging the firms profited from Nazi-era slave labor.

One lawsuit, filed in Brooklyn on Monday, names Volkswagen and 11 other companies, including Siemens, Daimler-Benz, Krupp, Audi, BMW and Leica Camera.

The other lawsuit, filed in Newark on Monday, names only Volkswagen.

"The ghost of the Third Reich will hang over every Volkswagen car unless the company takes action and provides justice to the thousands of its former slave laborers around the world," said attorney Mel Weiss, who was involved in the settlement negotiations with Swiss banks.

The lawsuits come just weeks after Jewish groups and lawyers for Holocaust victims reached a \$1.25 billion settlement with Swiss banks over Holocaust-era claims.

Although the lawsuits do not demand a specific amount of money, lawyers said they will seek at least \$75,000 for each of the surviving victims.

Historians estimate that more than 7 million people were forced to work as slave laborers under the Nazi regime, and it remains unclear how many are still alive.

Volkswagen, Europe's largest auto manufacturer, would not comment on the lawsuit. □

Historic N.Y. synagogue begins rebuilding journey following fire

Eric J. Greenberg

New York Jewish Week

NEW YORK (JTA) — Judy Klemperer gingerly picked up a black prayer book from a large pile lying in a laundry bin and wiped off the ashes.

"It's all wet and warped," she said, shaking her head sadly. "It won't be used again."

The prayer book was one of hundreds being placed in clear plastic garbage bags Monday by a handful of female volunteers, congregants of the historic Central Synagogue in midtown Manhattan.

The damaged books will be buried Sept. 13 in a ritual ceremony at the Linden Hill cemetery in Queens.

The books, including Torahs, will in effect serve as a memorial to the devastating fire that ripped through the synagogue last Friday.

The fire, which struck just as the Sabbath was descending, destroyed the roof of the 126-year-old Moorish sanctuary and threw the lives of its 1,400 members into disarray.

But next to the plastic bags were tables piled high with red and blue books that were being rescued. The volunteers were meticulously cleaning them and placing them on a card table marked "cleaned."

These holy volumes seemed to signify the hope and determination of the congregation to join together and begin the process of rebuilding.

Coming only a few weeks before the High Holidays, the blaze — which authorities believe was an accident started by a blowtorch from workmen doing renovations — has forced the Reform synagogue to scramble for a new space to accommodate the anticipated 5,000 Rosh Hashanah worshippers.

The synagogue's spiritual leader, Rabbi Peter Rubenstein, who rescued several invaluable Torah scrolls from the sanctuary, said among the first on the scene were several Christian colleagues from nearby churches, including Cardinal John O'Connor, as well as fellow rabbis.

"They were my source of strength as I watched the building burn," the rabbi said.

Rubenstein said that looking at the crippled building this week "is heartbreaking and hopeful."

The heartbreak comes from "the mass of devastation and destruction of a building that holds so many memories for so many people."

He is hopeful, he said, "because so much of the structure is standing. The ark has been relatively unscarred as though protected; I believe it was protected."

Indeed, it was a day of mixed feelings as a steady stream of congregants returning from vacation or a weekend in the country stopped by the synagogue's community center to see for themselves the damage wreaked upon their house of worship.

"It's worse than I thought," said a shaken Marilyn Alper, a board member, after a quick look inside the sandstone structure — a city and national landmark that has been dubbed the oldest continuous-use synagogue in New York.

To a casual observer walking past East 55th Street, the scaffolding surrounding the synagogue makes it look as though the

building is undergoing routine renovations, as it had been for months before the fire.

The blaze, which caused several million dollars worth of damage, burned for three hours while firefighters worked feverishly to save the dozens of stained-glass windows and hand-crafted colored pillars from destruction. No one was killed or seriously injured.

But inside the building, a reporter saw a scene that resembled a movie clip of a London building after a World War II bombing raid.

The synagogue was built in 1872 and designed by Henry Fernbach, one of the first Jewish architects in America.

With its banded arches and prominent twin 122-foot minaret towers topped by bronze onion domes, the synagogue building was considered a showcase of Spanish Moorish Revival architecture.

But on Monday, Rubenstein said the site reminded him of a picture of the aftermath of Kristallnacht, when Germans and Austrians destroyed Jewish property.

The floor of the sanctuary was blackened, covered with ashes and debris.

Huge twisted metal — once scaffolding — was propped up in corners like bizarre postmodern art pieces.

Once handsome wooden pews were blackened and burnt, many already destroyed and removed.

The smell of smoke hung heavy as workmen in blue T-shirts carted barrels of debris, including large pieces of charred wood, to metal trash bins.

Most of the roof was destroyed, with only a skeletal section remaining over the westernmost section of the building. It is this section where the ark and pulpit sit, and incredibly they were found in good shape. On Monday huge plastic sheets covered the ark section.

Most of the damage was caused after the roof was destroyed and several large beams collapsed, with some crashing to the floor of the sanctuary.

Water damage also was extensive as firefighters pumped thousands of gallons into the sanctuary.

Marred were some of the beautiful hand-stenciled blue and red walls.

While the main floor was a mess, it appeared that the balcony was mostly spared, with its stained-glass windows shedding some light on the gloomy scene below.

The synagogue's archives and collection of Judaica also survived, having been removed for the earlier renovation.

Current plans call for a cover to be put over the entire building within a few weeks to protect the interior, Rubenstein said.

The synagogue is fully insured for the damage, but officials are also considering a lawsuit against Turner Construction, the general contractor whose workmen apparently caused the blaze while installing an air-conditioning system.

Officials said repairs will reach into the millions and take several years.

But the synagogue's rabbi was not daunted.

"I have no doubt we will return it to its original pristine condition," Rubenstein said. "Sadly, Jews are experts at rebuilding."

Referring to the destruction of the First Holy Temple in Jerusalem 2,584 years ago and rebuilt some seven decades later, Rubenstein said, "This will not take 60 years." □