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81st Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Arafat addresses N.Y. panel

Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat stopped short of reiterating his determination to declare Palestinian statehood on May 4, 1999.

But in an address in New York before the Center for Middle East Peace and Economic Cooperation, where he appeared with Israeli politicians from both sides of the political spectrum, Arafat said the date, which is the day that final-status talks between the two sides are supposed to be completed, "just cannot come and go."

Arafat also called for joint action between the Palestinians and the Israelis to deal with terror and promised that no anti-Israeli broadcasting would occur on Palestinian children's television in the future.

Meanwhile, an Israeli official was reported as saying that final agreement on an American proposal to jump-start the stalled peace process could be reached within the next 10 days.

The comment came as U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright held separate meetings with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat to discuss the proposal, under which Israel would turn over an additional 13 percent of the West Bank in return for a Palestinian crackdown on terrorism.

Yigal Amir's friend sentenced

An Israeli woman was sentenced to nine months in prison for failing to tell police about the plot to assassinate Yitzhak Rabin.

Margalit Har-Sheti, who expressed remorse for her actions for the first time after the sentencing, could have been sentenced for up to two years. [Page 4]

Beatification sparks controversy

The Simon Wiesenthal Center asked Pope John Paul II to postpone beatification of Alojzije Stepinac, the archbishop of Zagreb during World War II. Historians debate the role Stepinac played under the pro-Nazi fascist regime that ruled Croatia during the war.

Because of Yom Kippur, the JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN will not be published Wednesday and Thursday, Sept. 30 and Oct. 1.

REMEMBERING THE YOM KIPPUR WAR

Survivor of Egyptian onslaught recalls hellish days of October

By Avi Machlis

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Each fall, when the High Holidays approach, Yossi Harel finds it hard to escape the vivid memories of three hellish days at the beginning of the Yom Kippur War.

It is 25 years later, but Harel, 50, wearing a trim graying beard, big round glasses and a knitted kippah, remembers the beginning of the war as if it were yesterday. Sitting in his modest Jewish Agency for Israel office, where he is director of the Unit for Jewish and Cultural Education and Ulpanim, Harel tells a story of heroism, determination and a prayer shawl that helped save a battered unit lost in the Sinai desert.

Thousands of individual stories like these make up the collective memory of the Yom Kippur War, when Israel was taken by surprise and faced one of the most serious threats to its existence.

Most Israelis were at home or in synagogue on Oct. 6, 1973, as news of the war broke. But when the first strike hit, Harel was already on the front line, manning a post on the Suez Canal, or what was known as the Bar-Lev line opposite Egypt.

Harel, then a university student, was one of 436 soldiers stationed in the Bar Lev fortifications, spread along 110 miles of the canal. There were only three tanks and seven artillery batteries on the Israeli side, and they would soon face thousands of Egyptian troops, artillery pieces, tanks and missiles.

His reserve unit — the 68th infantry battalion — was called up for duty before Rosh Hashanah.

Sgt. Harel sent a letter protesting the call-up to Moshe Dayan, then defense minister, since the unit had also served during Passover. Dayan replied with an order to release as many men as possible for the holiday.

Harel says Dayan's response proved that the home front was oblivious to the dangers that lurked on the eve of the war — and there were many unheeded warning signals.

Soldiers at the Bar-Lev posts were monitoring movements on the Egyptian side. Many times, the 68th battalion reported armored vehicle movements and sightings of Egyptian troops suspiciously wearing helmets.

"None of us knew that the Egyptians were preparing for an all-out war," says Harel. "But we didn't understand why there was no reaction from above to our reports on what was happening on the other side."

On the Israeli side, soldiers who stayed for Yom Kippur prepared for the holiest day in the Jewish calendar. Harel, who is Orthodox, decided to stay on base at the "Milano" post for Yom Kippur, preferring to take a leave with his wife and two small children on Sukkot. A few yeshiva students who weren't soldiers came to help complete a minyan.

Yom Kippur began on Friday night, and the soldiers held a Kol Nidre service. Early on Saturday afternoon, as they rested to gather strength for the long fast, the company commander held a briefing in the mess hall.

Intelligence reports, Harel said, warned of a possible Egyptian shelling later that day.

Before the briefing was completed, a barrage of shells came crashing down on Milano.

"It began to rain shells of every type," recalls Harel. "It caught us completely

MIDEAST FOCUS

Riot erupts in central Israel

A riot in central Israel left at least 62 Arabs and six police injured in one of the worst clashes in recent years between Israeli Arabs and police. The clash occurred over land the Israeli Army wants to use for a training ground.

Mordechai slams legislator's plan

Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai criticized a Knesset member's proposal that Israel should launch a pre-emptive strike against Iran.

A member of the Labor Party, Ephraim Sneh, urged the strike following the display of the Shahab-3 ballistic missile in the Iranian capital over the weekend.

Dispute with Swiss resolved

Swiss officials said they had resolved a dispute with Israel over a letter written by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu regarding Swiss involvement in the Nazi gold affair.

Switzerland had considered canceling a meeting aimed at improving bilateral economic ties as a result of the letter, in which Netanyahu thanked World Jewish Congress President Edgar Bronfman for his efforts to convince Swiss banks to agree to a \$1.25 billion settlement of Holocaust-era claims.

Group warns premier

A group calling itself the Israel Support Network warned Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that he would risk losing support from the American right if he agrees to a further withdrawal from the West Bank.

In an advertisement in the New York Post, the group warned that any agreement on a withdrawal would be a "fundamental breach of trust" that the "Republicans in Congress, the fundamentalist Christians and the 2,000,000 right-wing American Jews have placed in him."



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Caryn Rosen Adelman, *President*
 Mark J. Joffe, *Executive Editor and Publisher*
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off-guard. Some of us weren't even fully dressed."

At first, there was panic. Some jumped for cover behind benches before the company commander ordered all troops to the bunker. Harel was sent to the observation tower to see what was happening.

"It was a frightening scene," he recalls. "Rubber boats carrying Egyptian soldiers were crossing the canal. Hundreds of Egyptian troops were mobilizing."

Troops at Milano still didn't realize just how serious things were until they turned on the radio and heard that Israel was under an all-out attack.

"Don't forget that Israel's self-confidence was extremely high at the time," says Harel, recalling the national pride after the 1967 Six-Day War, when Israel defeated Arab armies with lightning speed. "We were sure that within minutes, the air force would come in and crush the Egyptians."

Instead, Harel saw several Israeli planes fly in and get shot down. Meanwhile, he and his company commander opened fire on the rafts, sinking several, but failing to provide a formidable response to the massive movement of Egyptian troops across the canal.

A shell exploded, throwing shrapnel into the officer's face and Harel's elbow. He points to the scars that remain today.

But Harel was lucky. Back in the bunker, two soldiers were already dead. Harel takes a deep breath as he replays the gory scene. To make matters worse, the company doctor had gone into shell shock.

At night, they hunkered down while shells continued to fall relentlessly. By Sunday morning, four were dead, six more wounded. Morale was low, even though Harel's buddies knew they were comparatively lucky. Several posts along the canal had been completely wiped out.

Somehow, the company repelled Egyptian troops from the compound five times, before an order was issued at 10 p.m. on Sunday to abandon the post and head to a base about 15 miles north. Since many posts had already been overrun, the air force planned to shower the Israeli side of the Suez Canal with bombs.

They had to leave the corpses of their friends behind as they set out on foot. Throughout the night, Harel's company played cat and mouse with the Egyptian army. There were some 30,000 Egyptian troops swarming the Israeli side.

On Monday morning, after trekking through the desert and in and out of a nearby town, Harel's company found a resting place among some desert shrubbery. For the first time since Yom Kippur began more than two days earlier, they ate what little food they had.

Despite the confusion, one soldier managed to salvage his prayer shawl and tefillin. One by one, in the middle of the desert, secular and religious soldiers alike took turns donning the tefillin.

"We didn't know what would come next," says Harel. "The prayer gave us all a little encouragement."

Suddenly, the ground shook. A tank was approaching. A soldier put his ear to the ground to listen to the tank treads. "It's one of ours," he said.

Immediately, he grabbed the tallit, ran up the hill, and spread the prayer shawl like a flag to signal the tank.

The Israeli tank crew in the distance tried to decipher the signal. One crew member thought it was a tallit, but the commander thought it was kaffiyeh, or Arab headdress, and almost opened fire. In the end, the tallit was recognized and the tank steered for the soldiers.

Battered, bloody and exhausted, the 20 soldiers piled onto the tank and were transported to base. Of approximately 60 men who started Yom Kippur on Milano, about one-third were dead, one-third missing and later captured while the rest survived.

Harel saw some paratroopers preparing to head to the front. "I felt pity," he said. "They had no idea what was in store for them."

Harel was hospitalized, and soon met his family in an emotional reunion. Today, he has six children.

"Since I went through such a traumatic experience and came out alive, I felt I must do important things with my life, for example, having a big family," he said. "I really felt that I was given my life as a gift." □

JEWISH WORLD

Poll: Few back crosses

Only 15 percent of Poles support the placing of new crosses outside the site of the Auschwitz death camp by radical Catholic militants, according to a new public opinion poll.

But about half of those surveyed back the position of the Polish government and episcopate that the 22-foot cross under which Pope John Paul II once prayed should remain standing.

Meanwhile, a Polish priest was suspended for his role in the controversy over the crosses.

Ryszard Krol was placed on one-year sick leave after his parishioners erected one of the more than 300 crosses that have been set up outside Auschwitz since July.

Lileikis ruling set for next month

A medical commission appointed by a Lithuanian court to investigate if a suspected war criminal is fit to stand trial said it would not make a final decision before late October.

The war crimes trial of Aleksandras Lileikis who headed the Nazi-sponsored Lithuanian security police during World War II was delayed indefinitely two weeks ago.

A court in the capital of Vilnius appointed a medical commission of five doctors to investigate if the 92-year-old man is fit to stand trial.

Judge: Latvian can stay

A Canadian judge ruled that a suspected Nazi war criminal did not obtain his citizenship illegally.

As a result of the judge's ruling, the country's Justice Department cannot begin the process of revoking the citizenship of Peteris Vitols, who has admitted that he was a member of the Latvian SS during World War II.

Protest angers Jewish officials

Canadian Jewish officials are outraged that demonstrators donned yellow Jewish stars last week to protest federal gun control legislation.

"The use of Holocaust imagery to further the cause of gun lobbyists is totally offensive," said an official with the Canadian Jewish Congress. Citing the increased military sophistication of hate groups, the congress is supporting the legislation.

ADL reports on neo-Nazis

A neo-Nazi group called the National Alliance is one of the most technologically advanced hate groups on the World Wide Web.

The group often places messages in online chat rooms and distributes them over e-mail, according to the Anti-Defamation League, which issued a new report on the group last week.

Jewish group protests plan to beatify Croatian archbishop

By Ruth E. Gruber

ROME (JTA) — Pope John Paul II is set to beatify a controversial archbishop from World War II despite a call by the Simon Wiesenthal Center to put off the ceremony pending an independent historical investigation into the Croatian cleric's wartime record.

The pope is planning to beatify Alojzije Stepinac on Saturday during a two-day visit to Croatia.

Beatification is the final step before sainthood.

The pope declared Stepinac a "martyr to the faith" in July and earlier had proclaimed him a "servant of God."

The ceremony is to take place in the small town of Marija Bistrica, home to a popular shrine to the Virgin Mary.

Historians have sharply differing views as to Stepinac's role under the fascist Ustashe regime that ruled Croatia as a Nazi puppet state during World War II.

Last Friday, the Wiesenthal Center's Paris-based European office said the beatification of Stepinac could be perceived by some as a "provocation" or even an attempt at "historical revision."

In a letter to the Vatican, the center's European director, Shimon Samuels, urged the pope to put off beatification "until after the completion of an exhaustive study of Stepinac's wartime record based on full access to Vatican archives."

"A decision to await the dispassionate judgment of independent historians would forestall the perception of, at best, a provocation and, at worst, an exercise in historical revision," he wrote.

He cited "bitter memories and current religious sensitivities" in the former Yugoslavia and also reminded the pope of his frequently stated desire for reconciliation with the Jews.

Stepinac is regarded as a hero by Roman Catholic Croatians for having stood up to the Communists after the war.

But the Communists jailed Stepinac for collaborating with the Ustashe regime, which staged forced conversions and wholesale massacres of Serbs, Jews and Gypsies.

After a show trial, he was sentenced in 1946 to 16 years of hard labor and died under house arrest in 1960.

As archbishop of Zagreb in 1941, Stepinac indeed supported the regime of Ustashe leader Ante Pavelic.

But by 1942 he had withdrawn his backing and denounced the Ustashe's genocidal policies.

In today's tense climate of ethnic mistrust between Serbs and Croats, many Serbs, who belong to the Eastern Orthodox church, continue to view Stepinac as a war criminal.

They see him as a symbol of other Croatian Catholics who backed the Ustashe regime.

"There is no doubt that too many Catholic clergy, including Archbishop Saric of Sarajevo, had shown far too much sympathy with the Ustashe regime during the war and had condoned or turned a blind eye to their atrocities," the English historian Sir Duncan Wilson has written.

The beatification comes at the same time that another case has spotlighted the crimes of the Ustashe regime.

Dinko Sakic was extradited in June to Croatia from Argentina, where he had lived for half a century.

Sakic faces trial for war crimes committed when he was commander of the Ustashe regime's notorious wartime concentration camp at Jasenovac.

An estimated 500,000 people were tortured and killed at Jasenovac, known as the "Auschwitz of the Balkans."

The great majority were Serbs, but victims also included Jews, Gypsies and anti-fascist Croats. □

Friend of Rabin's killer sentenced to nine months

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A friend of Yitzhak Rabin's killer has been sentenced to nine months in jail for knowing of the assassination plans in advance but failing to warn police.

Margalit Har-Shefi, who expressed remorse for her actions for the first time after the sentencing, faced a maximum of two years in prison. Har-Shefi, 23, a resident of the West Bank settlement of Beit El, knew Amir from their days at Bar-Ilan University in Ramat Gan and from anti-peace process rallies.

In June, a Tel Aviv court found Har-Shefi guilty of failing to prevent a crime, ruling that there were inconsistencies in her testimony. She had maintained throughout her trial that she thought Amir was merely boasting of plans to assassinate Rabin.

In Sunday's ruling, which included a 15-month suspended sentence, the judge said that if Har-Shefi had shown a greater measure of responsibility and taken more vigorous action, the Rabin assassination may not have occurred.

After the court handed down the sentence, Har-Shefi read a written statement to reporters that she had been wronged.

"Had I even had the slightest suspicion that that man meant what he said, not only would I have reported him, I would have seen it as my civic and religious duty," she said.

"Although I am innocent," she added, "I am not innocent of a deep sense of sorrow over what had happened."

Har-Shefi's lawyer said he would appeal the sentence.

Amir, an ultranationalist university student opposed to the peace process with the Palestinians, assassinated Rabin at the end of a Nov. 4, 1995, peace rally in Tel Aviv.

Amir, who stated that he wanted to prevent Rabin from ceding land to the Palestinians, is serving a life sentence.

Amir's brother, Hagai, and a friend, Dror Adani, were convicted in a separate trial of plotting to kill Rabin. □

Dozens hurt as Israeli Arabs, police clash over expropriations

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The contentious issue of land expropriation has spurred one of the worst clashes in recent years between Israeli Arabs and police.

A riot Sunday in central Israel left at least 62 Arabs and six police injured. The clashes occurred after Israeli Arab demonstrators gathered to protest the confiscation of land from the town of Umm el-Fahm and the nearby village of Muawiya for use as army training grounds.

The army spokesman confirmed that the army had confiscated some 125 acres for training purposes, but added that it also returned to local residents some 500 acres that had been expropriated in the past.

Sunday's confrontation began after police tried to dismantle a protest tent at Muawiya. Police charged that the tent was placed provocatively inside the training area's fire zone. Local residents charged that the confrontation escalated after police burst into a high school in Umm el-Fahm.

Arab youths threw stones and Molotov cocktails at the police, who fired rubber bullets in response.

Elik Ron, an Israeli police commander, compared the violence to the intifada — the Palestinian uprising in the territories that occurred from 1987 to 1993.

He said police had to use rubber bullets after they had been attacked with gasoline bombs.

The riots continued throughout Sunday until the evening hours, bringing to a halt traffic on the Wadi Ara Road, a central artery that passes by Umm el-Fahm.

Among the wounded was Sheik Ra'ed Salah Mahajneh, the mayor of Umm el-Fahm, who is one of the leaders of the Islamic movement in Israel.

From his hospital bed, Mahajneh said he expected Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Public Security Minister Avigdor Kahalani to announce that the government had erred and that all the confiscated land would be returned to its owners. □

Israel permits black family to stay under Law of Return

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK (JTA) — Israel has finally accepted the Yisraels.

"We are thankful that the minister finally decided to grant my family citizenship," said Elazar Yisrael. "It's a long struggle, but the family is rejoicing."

Sarah Yisrael and her four children, ages 10 through 19, were granted the status of new immigrants last week, four months after they joined her husband, who had made aliyah in 1996.

The family, which is black, converted to Judaism under Conservative auspices in the United States a decade ago.

"We're strictly kosher, keep all of the holidays and the Torah is part of our life," Elazar Yisrael said in a telephone interview from the Israeli town of Beit Shemesh. "That's the reason we moved to this country."

Citizenship under Israel's Law of Return is granted automatically to any Jew who makes aliyah, including those who convert to Judaism under non-Orthodox auspices in the Diaspora.

But when Elazar Yisrael's wife and children first arrived in Israel in May, the family was detained at Israel's Ben-Gurion Airport and told they would have to leave the country. After the Masorti, or Conservative, movement in Israel intervened, they were allowed to stay temporarily while their status was decided.

The status of two grandchildren, ages 7 and 8, who are in the couple's legal custody has yet to be finalized.

Some involved in advocating for the family charged racism.

"The fact that they were black from the Chicago area and people of colorful dress raised suspicion that they were Black Hebrews, which they are not," said Dan Evron, the attorney representing the Yisrael family on behalf of the Masorti movement.

The Black Hebrews are a sect of about 1,250 members who started immigrating to Israel from Chicago in 1969.

Asked how he feels about Israel after the trouble his family has faced, Elazar Yisrael said: "I don't hold nothing in my heart against anyone. I'm just thankful to God and the Conservative movement who went totally to bat for me.

"Hopefully now that everything's all over with, I'd like to let bygones be bygones and really settle down." □