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82nd Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Shahak declares candidacy

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is bringing Israel to the brink of disaster, former Israeli army chief Amnon Lipkin-Shahak charged in announcing his own candidacy for prime minister.

Shahak, who hopes to head a centrist party, also attacked Labor Party leader Ehud Barak as being disconnected from the Israeli public.

Shahak's remarks drew immediate criticism, with the Labor Party branding him a political novice and Netanyahu saying his comments "border on incitement."

The centrist candidate said he would not rule out the formation of a Palestinian state and spoke of a possible compromise on returning the Golan Heights to Syria. [Page 3]

Sharon rules out challenge

Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon downplayed expectations that he may challenge Netanyahu for the leadership of the Likud Party.

Sharon said he is working to "get more unity in the Likud Party and the national camp" in advance of the May 17 elections.

Arab shot because of toy gun

Israeli soldiers enforcing a curfew in the West Bank town of Hebron shot a Palestinian who ran toward them brandishing a toy gun that they thought was real.

The commander of the troops said the man, who later died of his wounds, appeared to be mentally unstable.

The army imposed the curfew after gunmen opened fire on a van traveling between Kiryat Arba and Hebron, wounding two Israeli women.

Jewish freshmen join Congress

Three freshmen Jewish members of the U.S. Congress began their two-year terms when the 106th Congress opened its session. Reps. Shelley Berkley (D-Nev.), Anthony Weiner (D-N.Y.) and Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.) are among the 23 Jewish representatives in the new House of Representatives, down from 25 in the 105th Congress.

Former Rep. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) was sworn in to serve in the Senate, which has 11 Jews, a record number.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Religious pluralism battle erupts anew on two fronts

By Avi Machlis

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Exactly one year ago, a committee headed by former Israeli Finance Minister Ya'acov Ne'eman was putting the finishing touches on what was billed as a historic compromise over the conversion crisis in Israel.

It aimed to usher in a new era of dialogue between Orthodoxy and the liberal streams of Judaism and to start a process of reconciliation between Israel and Diaspora Jewry.

The compromise was designed to avert the Knesset's adoption of a bill that would codify into law the Orthodox monopoly over conversions to Judaism performed in Israel.

It called for the establishment of an institute in which the three major streams of Judaism would be involved in preparing candidates for conversion, while leaving the actual performance of the conversions under Orthodox control.

But one year later, that compromise appears destined to become no more than a historical footnote, and some fear its failure could lead to an unprecedented rift in Israel-Diaspora relations.

Although the institute is preparing to open, the compromise proposals were never accepted by Israel's Orthodox Chief Rabbinate. The liberal movements will participate, but without the rabbinate's endorsement, Reform and Conservative leaders in Israel fear graduates of the institute may never have their conversions recognized. Nothing, they say, will have been achieved.

Instead of dialogue, the apparent failure of the Ne'eman Committee's compromise has sent both sides in the religious pluralism campaign back to the battlefield — which is now being waged on two fronts:

- **Conversions:** Orthodox parties in the Knesset are attempting to revive the conversion bill after the Jerusalem District Court last week ordered the Interior Ministry to recognize as Jewish 23 people who underwent conversions performed by Conservative and Reform rabbis.

The bill has been redrafted to incorporate the Ne'eman Committee's proposals. But leaders of the liberal movements say this undermines the spirit of the compromise, which was meant to avoid legislation codifying Orthodox control over conversions.

The ruling is being appealed to Israel's Supreme Court, which is considered likely to uphold it.

But recognizing the potential for further discord, Hanan Porat, chairman of the Knesset's Law Committee, said he would ask the Supreme Court to postpone hearing the appeal until after Israel's May 17 national elections.

- **Religious councils:** In another piece of legislation prompted by a court ruling — this time from the Supreme Court — Orthodox legislators last month won support in the first of three Knesset votes on a bill designed to bypass the high court's decision requiring the government to appoint Conservative and Reform representatives to municipal religious councils.

The so-called "bypass bill" requires every member of a religious council to abide by rulings of the Orthodox Chief Rabbinate. Reform and Conservative leaders are furious, saying the bill mocks the court's ruling.

This week the Knesset Law Committee postponed the second and third votes on the bill by the full legislature.

But at the same time, the Chief Rabbinate ordered local religious councils not to

MIDEAST FOCUS

More cultists face deportation

Israel issued deportation orders against three more members of a Denver-based doomsday cult. Israel took a similar step against 11 other cultists earlier in the week after raiding two of their homes near Jerusalem.

It was unclear when the 14 would be deported, a police spokeswoman said.

The group wants to be deported to Greece because other members are already there, according to the group's lawyer.

Premier doffs bulletproof vest

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu drew cheers from supporters when he removed his bulletproof vest during a campaign stop in northern Israel.

After asking if anyone in the audience was not a member of the Likud Party, he opened the vest and dropped it to the floor.

Netanyahu made the move after reading the audience a note from an adviser that the bulky vest looked silly on him.

Roadside bomb wounds Israeli

Hezbollah gunmen detonated a roadside bomb as an Israeli convoy was en route to an army base in southern Lebanon. One Israeli soldier was seriously wounded in the blast.

Japan seeks Mideast role

Japan is seeking a role in Middle East peacemaking because it believes that it maintains a good relationship with both sides.

Speaking in London before traveling to the Middle East, Japan's foreign minister said his country also has the advantage of being able to offer financial aide to countries in the region.

Masahiko Komura plans to visit Israel, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and the Palestinian self-rule areas in the coming days.

convene as long as Reform and Conservative members take their seats. The liberal streams see much at stake in this battle because the religious councils, supervised by the Religious Affairs Ministry, have exclusive jurisdiction over marriage, kashrut, burial and other religious matters for all Jews living in Israel.

The ongoing pluralism battle dates back to Israel's founding.

The 1948 Declaration of Independence defined Israel as a Jewish and democratic state. But the failure to agree on a constitution has left ambiguities that persist until today.

Israel's Law of Return, which grants automatic citizenship to Jews, has historically been the source of the problem. The law was amended in 1970 to define a Jew, for the purpose of receiving citizenship, as "one born of a Jewish mother or who has converted." Since then, groups representing the haredi, or "fervent," side of Orthodoxy have often tried to change the law to require conversion according to halachah, or Orthodox Jewish law.

The "Who is a Jew" issue took on greater urgency in the mid-1980s, when Shas, a haredi party, secured control of the Interior Ministry and tried to prevent those converted by the Reform and Conservative movements abroad from being registered in Israel as Jewish.

In 1986, the ministry refused to register as Jewish Shoshana Miller, who converted through a Reform rabbi before moving to Israel from Colorado. Even a court ruling in her favor was not considered a precedent by the ministry, and the Reform movement petitioned the Supreme Court.

A landmark ruling in 1989 required the government to register anyone converted abroad as Jews, including those converted by Reform and Conservative rabbis.

Only a tiny number of Reform and Conservative converts immigrate to Israel each year. But for the liberal Jewish movements, the struggle has always been a matter of principle. They want to know that the Jewish state — where most religious Jews are indeed Orthodox — fully recognizes Diaspora Jews, the bulk of whom are Conservative or Reform.

Since the 1989 ruling, the Reform and Conservative movements have repeatedly turned to the courts in their struggle for recognition and equality, demanding that the government abide by the law.

But these court decisions infuriated the Orthodox, who accused the movements of trying to breach the "status quo," a set of principles on religion and state that were agreed to by the Orthodox and David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister.

And so the Orthodox parties, who have gained power in recent years, have made the Knesset their battlefield.

As part of the coalition agreements he forged before taking office in 1996, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu promised his powerful Orthodox allies he would push through the conversion bill.

April 1997 marked a turning point.

Blaming the liberal movements for breaking the status quo and going to the Supreme Court to obtain recognition of conversions performed in Israel, the Orthodox parties pushed through the first of three votes on the conversion bill, sparking a crisis of confidence between Diaspora Jewry and Israel.

In June 1997, both sides agreed to freeze all court petitions and legislative moves while the Ne'eman Committee explored possible solutions to the crisis. For the first time ever, Orthodox, Conservative and Reform representatives sat together to try to forge a compromise.

The issue captured the attention of the Israeli public as never before. Newspapers frequently reported the intricacies of the debate. Moderate Orthodox groups backing the Ne'eman commission sprouted. More and more Knesset members began to support the campaign for religious equality.

But the liberal movements say the Orthodox leadership never really embraced the compromise and has even stepped up anti-Reform and anti-Conservative rhetoric since the Ne'eman Committee proposals were first floated.

The cautious optimism of last year, when the committee issued its compromise, is now a distant memory. On both sides, there is a feeling that the debate has become a zero-sum game and could explode into the worst rift ever between Israel and the Diaspora. □



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JEWISH WORLD

Swiss to fund Holocaust list

The Swiss Bankers Association said it will contribute \$4 million to help create a computerized list of the millions of Holocaust victims.

The group said it made the move in an effort to help match dormant wartime bank accounts to their rightful owners. The World Jewish Congress agreed to pay the other half of the costs of building the list, which is based on records kept by the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem.

War crimes suspect to get exam

A Lithuanian court ordered a medical examination of an alleged war criminal. Kazys Gimzauskas, 90, failed to appear in court earlier this week, citing poor health.

He stands accused of handing Jews over to the Nazis when he was an official with the Lithuanian security police during World War II.

Suit tries to stop Auschwitz tours

A U.S. Jewish group is suing to block Israel from sending Jewish students to the site of the former Auschwitz death camp until a church is removed from the site.

Rabbi Avi Weiss, leader of the New York-based Coalition for Jewish Concerns — Amcha, said the church, which was erected in 1983, violates a U.N. declaration ordering that the camp be left intact. The erection of dozens of crosses by Catholic fundamentalists near the site of the death camp last year created an uproar and angered Jewish groups.

Castro visits Havana synagogue

Cuban President Fidel Castro visited a Havana synagogue, where he mingled with 200 congregants during Chanukah celebrations last month. Castro spent about two hours in the synagogue and participated in the lighting of Chanukah candles, according to officials of the Canadian Jewish Congress, which has been helping the 1,200-member Cuban Jewish community for more than 30 years.

Community leader Jose Miller told CJC officials that Castro expressed his admiration for the Jewish people and spoke out against racism.

Wallenberg statue to be replaced

Budapest city officials are replacing a statue commemorating the wartime heroism of Raoul Wallenberg.

Officials removed the worn and battered original statue from a Budapest park so that a bronze copy could be cast and erected in April. Wallenberg is credited with saving thousands of Jews in Nazi-occupied Hungary, where he led a rescue mission by issuing them Swedish passports.

Shahak formally announces bid with sharp tongue, strong critique

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Former Israeli army chief Amnon Lipkin-Shahak came out swinging as he launched his bid for prime minister this week.

Speaking at a Tel Aviv news conference Wednesday where he announced his anticipated candidacy, Shahak charged Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu with bringing Israel to the brink of disaster.

Shahak called Netanyahu a “danger to Israel” and said the premier is ignoring the pressing problems confronting Israel for his own political interests.

Shahak, who hopes to head a centrist party, was more conciliatory in his remarks about opposition leader Ehud Barak, whom he succeeded as army chief of staff. Last month Shahak rejected Barak’s invitation to join the Labor Party — a move that some observers said could split the moderate vote and work in Netanyahu’s favor.

While describing Barak as “totally capable,” he said the Labor leadership is disconnected from the Israeli public and is “entrenched in the 1950s.”

The sharp rhetoric immediately put the leaders of Israel’s established political parties on the defensive as the campaign for the May 17 election shifted into high gear. Even before Shahak formally doffed his uniform after a military career that spanned more than three decades, he led in the polls.

Shahak told reporters that the two largest parties, Labor and Likud, no longer represent the Israeli public and that he is offering to lead the way toward national reconciliation and unity.

“In the next election, the choice is clear — between change and national reconciliation or a deepening of the internal war that can bring us to disaster,” said Shahak.

During his news conference, he gave voters a taste of his centrist position, saying Jerusalem is indisputably the united capital of Israel, but adding that he would not rule out the creation of a Palestinian state.

He also spoke of a possible compromise on returning the Golan Heights to Syria. Israeli troops could only be withdrawn from southern Lebanon after an agreement is reached with Damascus, he added.

Shahak’s speech drew immediate criticism from both sides of the political divide, with the Labor Party branding him a political novice and Netanyahu saying his comments “border on incitement.”

“He decided to open his campaign stressing hate and division, while at the same time avoiding taking a stand on the main issues,” said Health Minister Yehoshua Matza of Likud.

Labor Knesset member Yossi Beilin termed Shahak a “parody of a politician who wants to be elected.”

Beilin said Shahak is a weak imitation of Barak — adding that he preferred the original.

“If he really wants to defeat Netanyahu, he must give Barak chance,” Beilin said.

Leah Rabin, the widow of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin — under whom Shahak served as deputy army chief of staff — said she regretted Shahak’s decision not to join forces with Barak.

Shahak had hoped to launch his campaign with a strong lineup of other leading political figures committed to running on a new, centrist party list for the May 17 elections.

But he has yet to work out his differences with Knesset member Dan Meridor, a former minister in the Netanyahu government who left the Likud to announce his own centrist run for prime minister.

“I had hoped that Dan Meridor and I would agree to work together from the start, and decide who would lead later on. Dan chose differently, and I respect that. However, I am certain that ultimately we will cooperate together,” Shahak said.

Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai is also said to be considering bolting Likud to join the centrist party, but has not yet made any decision. □

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Holocaust survivor loses battle, vows to fight on for compensation*By Peter Ephross*

NEW YORK (JTA) — After more than five decades, a window of opportunity opened for Holocaust survivor Edith Golden. Then, quickly, the window shut again.

As a result of a 1995 U.S. court ruling, which awarded Hugo Princz and 10 other Americans imprisoned by the Nazis in concentration camps some \$2.1 million, Golden thought that she, too, would finally receive compensation for her family's sufferings during World War II, when they endured the worst pogrom in Romania's history.

As part of the Princz settlement, the U.S. government established the Holocaust Claims Program, which allowed American citizens who suffered at the hands of the Nazis to file for restitution. The State Department recently sent letters to those individuals whose claims were approved — and Germany has promised it will make payments before the end of the year.

Roughly 230 people have been accepted, according to Steven Perles, who represents Holocaust survivors seeking claims.

While the State Department, under an agreement with Germany, cannot reveal the number of survivors or the amount of money they are expected to receive, one thing is clear: Edith Golden will not be among them.

In August 1997, despite the sympathetic audience she had received when she testified that June in front of the U.S. Justice Department's Foreign Claims Settlement Commission, Golden was turned down. Unless a new law is passed, it is unlikely that she and her sister will ever receive compensation.

In addition to dramatizing the frustration faced by a Holocaust survivor who wants compensation for the suffering that she and her family endured during World War II, Golden's case sheds light on the difficulties that can arise when distinctions are drawn between levels of suffering — even when the countries involved appear to be making a good-faith effort to provide compensation.

Golden was born in Iasi, Romania, in 1928. Her father, Joseph Hirsch, who was born in Romania, moved to the United States as a young boy. After serving in the U.S. Navy in World War I, he returned to his native land and married a local woman.

Golden remembers that her father wanted to return to the United States, but the Great Depression kept him away. Meanwhile, anti-Semitism began to spread across Romania. Golden remembers demonstrations and beatings on the streets, curfews and separate air raid shelters for Jews.

These segregated bunkers became significant on June 29, 1941. As Golden remembers it: "They called a false air raid and we went to the shelter. No sooner did we get there than some Germans came and pulled us out of the shelter and began shouting at us and poking at us with bayonets."

Golden and her family were lined up with Jews from across the town and marched to the police courtyard.

On the way there, Golden says, her mother was beaten to paralysis and her father's head split open with the butt of a rifle. In the courtyard, they were forced to lie three people on top of each other while German officers and Romanians shot at them from the roof of the police station. After several hours, the men were taken off and put in cattle cars. Golden never saw her father again.

Golden's father was among an estimated 13,000 Jews who died in the Iasi pogrom, one of the major killing operations in World War II, according to Radu Ioanid, the associate director of the international programs division at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

For the next three years, Golden, her sister and mother lived a story that is made no less disturbing by its familiarity. Able, like many Romanian Jews, to return to their apartment, they were forced to sell most of their possessions — including her mother's gold teeth — to buy the food necessary to survive.

"A glass of milk was a treat," she remembers.

At night, when the German soldiers made their roundups, she and her sister hid in a nearby garbage container.

By the time the town was liberated by the Soviet army in 1944, Golden suffered from severe rashes and malnutrition, and she had lost most of her teeth. After her mother died at the end of the war, she and her sister, now teen-agers, made their way to New York with the help of an uncle.

Once in the United States, Golden cobbled together a life. She earned her high school degree and met her husband, an American serviceman. They married in 1949, and have two children.

But her harrowing wartime experiences have stayed with her. She says she has nightmares at least once a week.

"To this day," she says, nervously ripping her napkin into shreds during a conversation last year at a Brooklyn diner, "I still have the urge to hide when I hear a siren."

And she's never given up her battle to receive compensation. Soon after the war, she applied to the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany. Since her father had served in the military, she tried the Veterans Administration — to no avail.

But after the decision in the Princz case was announced, she called William Marks, a Washington lawyer who was one of the attorneys who represented Princz. Marks agreed to represent Golden, her sister and a friend who has since passed away.

They were among the more than 2,000 people who presented their cases in front of the Justice Department commission — in addition to former survivors, U.S. soldiers who had been imprisoned in German prisoner-of-war camps were eligible to apply.

In order to receive compensation, Golden believed she had to prove two things: that she was an American citizen during the war, and that she had experienced suffering at the hands of the Nazis. There is no question that Golden was a citizen, and in testimony before the commission in Washington, she left no doubt of her suffering.

"Claimant's ordeal was harrowing and left her scarred for life," the commission wrote in its decision.

But Golden's claim was turned down because the commission had ruled in a 1997 "Final Decision" that only those American citizens who suffered in a concentration camp or subcamp, forced labor march or were interned in a ghetto or camp in the region of Transnistria were eligible for the Holocaust Claims Program.

Legally, there appears to be little in the way of a counterclaim: The commission's findings fit the letter of the law. But, says Ioanid, there were no ghettos in most of Romania. In other words, Golden's bid for compensation was turned down because of the Nazis' policy in the region where she lived, not on the basis of how much she suffered.

As Golden puts it: "What's the difference where they beat you? What's the difference where they starved you? What's the difference where they shot at you?" □