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82nd Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

U.S. survivors to get payments

The first payments to needy U.S. Holocaust survivors from a Swiss humanitarian fund are scheduled to be made Friday, according to Jewish sources involved with the fund's distribution.

Some 60,000 survivors are expected to receive about \$500 each, bringing the worldwide number of beneficiaries of the Swiss fund to 110,000.

The nearly \$200 million fund, set up in 1997 by Swiss banks and other companies to benefit needy Holocaust survivors, is separate from the \$1.25 billion settlement that leading Swiss banks reached last year to end Holocaust-era claims against them.

Premier disappoints U.S. leaders

Reform and Conservative delegates on a U.S. leadership mission to Israel said they were disappointed by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's failure to address their concerns on religious pluralism matters.

Netanyahu told the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations that the only way to pursue Jewish unity is "to adopt a series of compromises." But he gave no details, they said.

Sharansky sees his KGB file

Israeli Trade Minister Natan Sharansky got a look at his KGB file dating back to when he was a leading campaigner for Jewish emigration rights in the Soviet Union during the 1970s.

Sharansky, who is heading his third trade mission to Moscow, was given some of the documents from his file during a meeting with the head of Russia's security service.

Russian Jews set budget

The Russian Jewish Congress plans to distribute nearly \$2.6 million for communal projects, most of them in Moscow, according to the group's 1999 budget. Created in 1996 with the backing of Russia's leading Jewish business people, the group raises about one-tenth of the money spent in Russia on Jewish projects.

The largest contributions to the Russian Jewish community come from the Jewish Agency for Israel, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and a private foundation affiliated with the Lubavitch movement.

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

Upsurge of Russian anti-Semitism sowing seeds of fear in community

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — The recent upsurge of anti-Semitism in Russia has sown the seeds of fear and uncertainty among much of the country's Jewish community.

Although different segments of the community may vary in their assessment of the situation, most Jews here agree on one point: They are living through one of the most crucial periods since the fall of communism seven years ago.

An unstable political situation — fed by persistent reports of President Boris Yeltsin's failing health — coupled with a steadily worsening economic climate has led Russian nationalist leaders to blame Jews for society's ills.

Anti-Semitism is being employed by both the political left — represented by the Communist Party and its allies — and by far-right groups such as the neo-Nazi Russian National Unity movement.

It is not coincidental that this climate has prompted an increase in the rate of aliyah among Russian Jewry, which now numbers by various estimates between 450,00 and 600,000.

During the past three months, there has been an 80 percent increase in the number of people emigrating over the same period a year ago, according to Alla Levy, head of the Jewish Agency for Israel's Russian office.

This increase took place across Russia, according to Jewish officials all over the country. And they attribute it to the combination of two factors: the economy and growing anti-Semitism.

Among these officials is Vladimir Boroditzky, a community leader in Bryansk, a city in central Russia.

Like other Jewish leaders, he could not say with certainty which factor predominates in people's decision to emigrate.

Just the same, he adds, "There is a sense of fear, and it has become stronger."

Older Jews — those who remember the Stalinist-era anti-Semitic campaigns of the 1940s and 1950s — have an especially uneasy feeling about the current wave of anti-Semitism.

"These people survived Stalinist anti-Semitism," says Pinchas Goldschmidt, Moscow's chief rabbi.

While noting that there are few similarities between today and what they experienced 50 years ago, he adds, "They are worried."

Younger Jews, especially those who take part in the life of the community, say they feel heightened societal tensions.

But they are generally less inclined than their elders to overdramatize the current situation.

Zhenya Mikhaleva, director of the Moscow Hillel, says her group's activists have all noticed an increase in anti-Semitic comments both in school and on the streets.

"They are less scared than their parents, but they are certainly not happy with it," she adds.

Says Tatyana Kaletskaya, a screenwriter, "I don't see any specific evidence that anti-Semitism in daily life has increased dramatically.

"But the situation frightens me. Neither in society nor in politics do I see any real forces that could withstand this anti-Semitic pressure if the situation worsens."

Whatever the generational reaction may be, it is clear that growing anti-Semitism

MIDEAST FOCUS

Premier names finance minister

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu named the leader of the Knesset coalition as his new finance minister.

Observers said the appointment of Meir Sheerit, who is of Sephardi descent, came amid the premier's efforts to gain support from that community's voters.

Arens: Camp David a mistake

Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Arens reiterated his longstanding view that the Camp David Accords were a mistake. "I haven't changed my views on the matter," he told a visiting delegation of U.S. Jewish leaders.

However, Arens, who voted against the accord with Egypt when he was a Knesset member, said any agreement that Israel signs has to be honored.

Moderates do well in NRP primary

Moderate members of Israel's National Religious Party fared well in the primary to determine the party's list of candidates in the May elections for the Knesset.

Meanwhile, Knesset member Hanan Porat, considered a leading party hawk, placed 11th and is not expected to win a Knesset seat.

Saudi rejected Clinton offer

Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Abdullah rejected an offer by President Clinton to participate in a meeting with Israeli leaders on the sidelines of the funeral of Jordan's King Hussein earlier this month, according to a London-based, Saudi-owned newspaper.

The daily Asharq al-Awsat quoted informed diplomatic sources that Clinton suggested the secret meeting at the funeral.

But the Saudi crown prince, who led his country's delegation to the funeral, cut Clinton short, telling him that his country's friendship with the United States "has limits."



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is affecting the daily life of Russian Jews, both in Moscow and in the provincial communities.

Jewish officials say that anti-Semitism — espoused by lawmakers in Parliament, in the mass media and at mass rallies — has created a darkened climate for the Jewish community, especially outside Moscow.

Though there have been few reports in recent months of violent attacks against Jews, they are more often exposed to verbal abuse, according to Jewish leaders.

"People are being screamed at on the streets, harassed much more than before," says Goldschmidt. "I can feel it myself, especially when I walk on Shabbat."

Many ordinary Jews, particularly those who remember Soviet-era anti-Semitism, say the community and its leaders should keep a low profile to avoid escalating tensions.

And some Jews here maintain that journalists are to blame, saying the situation would be less fraught with tension if they devoted less coverage to the anti-Semitism of the Communists and ultranationalists.

A Jewish member of Parliament also blamed journalists for being sensational in their coverage of anti-Semitism.

"Much of the situation has been created by the mass media themselves," says Viktor Sheinis, a 66-year-old Jewish member of the state Duma, the lower house of Parliament.

"Whenever I see a crowd of journalists in the Duma corridors, I can be quite sure they clustered" around Communist lawmaker Albert Makashov, who stirred controversy last fall with a series of anti-Semitic diatribes.

Many believe that the anti-Semitism of some prominent politicians has gotten ordinary Russians to feel free to unleash their own deep-seated anti-Semitism.

"Some people think: 'If a lawmaker can say this and go unpunished, why can't we say the same?'" says Viktor Shapiro, leader of the Jewish community in Russia's Baltic port of Kaliningrad.

Some observers are concerned that an already difficult situation will deteriorate further if there are no improvements in the Russian economy in the near future.

"People on the street don't care much about what anti-Semitic politicians say," says Alexander Sakov, editor of Shalom, a monthly newspaper in the Siberian city of Omsk that covers Jewish life throughout Siberia and the Far East.

"But when people go unpaid for months, they are looking for a convenient scapegoat. People are tired, but if they have jobs and get their salaries on time, they will look at things differently."

Despite the current climate, Jewish organizations throughout the country continue to operate freely, and there have been no reports of any group curtailing its activities.

But some Jewish leaders say communal life has nonetheless undergone a visible change in the last several months.

"Anti-Semitic and neo-Nazi activities have in a way succeeded in lowering the profile of Jewish life" in Russia, says Michael Steiner, director of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee's Moscow office.

Just the same, several high-profile community projects have recently been launched.

Last week, the Russian Jewish Congress launched a \$10 million project to construct a community center in downtown Moscow across from the city's Choral Synagogue.

Another community center, being built at a cost of \$7 million by the Lubavitch movement, is slated to be completed later this year.

Mikhail Chlenov, president of the Va'ad, a Jewish umbrella group, sees an irony in the present anti-Semitic climate.

"The current crisis may strengthen certain forms of Jewish life," he says. "There may be fewer high-profile projects — such as huge presentations and shows — and more concrete smaller projects."

"The situation is not irreversibly negative. These difficulties may serve as a unifying factor for various Jewish groups, which often compete with each other, especially in the provinces."

As Russian Jews confront a difficult set of circumstances, he adds, the community now needs two things: confidence and a clear vision of its future. □

JEWISH WORLD

Hillary attacked on statehood

The mayor of New York City criticized First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton for her public statement last year backing the creation of a Palestinian state. Rudolph Giuliani's comments were viewed as the opening shot between the two likely contenders for the U.S. Senate seat being vacated by Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-N.Y.).

B'nai B'rith head to attend trial

B'nai B'rith International's immediate past president is expected to attend the war crimes trial of a former concentration camp commander. The Croatian government requested that Tommy Baer attend the trial of Dinko Sakic, which is expected to begin next month in the Croatian capital of Zagreb.

In 1995, Baer, a former U.S. federal prosecutor, helped locate Sakic, who was charged with crimes against humanity between 1942 and 1944, when he was commander of the Jasenovac concentration camp under Croatia's Nazi-backed Ustashe regime.

Right-winger visits Auschwitz

An Italian right-wing leader visited the site of the Auschwitz death camp. The trip by Gianfranco Fini was the latest step in his drive to distance his National Alliance party from its neo-fascist roots. The National Alliance is a successor of the Italian Social Movement, a neo-fascist party founded after World War II by followers of Italy's fascist dictator Benito Mussolini.

Neo-Nazis tried in Budapest

The trial of eight neo-Nazis charged with assaulting Hungarian police opened recently in Budapest. The eight were detained after a fight earlier this week in which eight police officials were slightly injured. The accused face a maximum of five years' imprisonment.

Russian rightists mimic KKK

Members of an obscure Russian far-right group wearing Ku Klux Klan-style outfits demonstrated outside the U.S. Embassy in Moscow in support of U.S. militia groups. Russian commentators were surprised that local authorities had permitted the demonstration in a central Moscow district.

Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov recently launched a citywide campaign against extremists of all stripes.

Envoy helps plant trees

Israel's ambassador to Greece recently participated in the planting of 50 trees on a mountain north of Athens.

The planting, which was part of Greece's commemoration of Israel's 50th anniversary, comes as the two countries are developing ongoing cooperation in a number of areas.

After marathon discussions, Knesset approves 1999 budget

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel's Knesset has approved the country's 1999 budget of approximately \$54 billion.

Passage of the budget, which was a month overdue and came after marathon discussions, was secured earlier this month by a vote of 48-34 after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu pledged some \$135 million to projects supported by Orthodox legislators in his governing coalition. Treasury officials are now at work finding ways to pay for those projects. They are expected to recommend cutting ministry budgets, a move likely to encounter staunch resistance.

Spending pledges to Netanyahu's coalition partners included \$50 million, primarily in education and housing, for the fervently Orthodox parties, and around \$50 million for settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Moshe Leon, the director general of the Prime Minister's Office, defended the pledges as far less than what had been predicted as necessary to get the budget approved.

The budget also includes \$4 million to fund Israel-Diaspora relations.

"This decision is a symbolic step in the relationship between Israel and the Diaspora," said Trade Minister Natan Sharansky, who added that the move reflected Israel's "obligation" to be a "shining light in promoting Jewish education for future generations."

One of the most fiery moments in the budget debate came during an exchange between Avraham Ravitz, the chairman of the parliamentary finance committee, and Labor Knesset member Ra'anana Cohen. As Ravitz, a member of the fervently Orthodox United Torah Judaism bloc, was announcing plans to cancel cost-of-living adjustments in grants to discharged soldiers in order to save money, Cohen heckled Ravitz by asking him what he had done to serve his country — a reference to the army deferments that members of the fervently Orthodox community receive.

Ravitz responded by calling Cohen a "little anti-Semite."

The Knesset later voted not to cancel the adjustments. □

Heir-apparent in Damascus shares father's hard-line views

By Douglas Davis

LONDON (JTA) — The heir apparent to Syrian President Hafez Assad said Syria would not loosen its control of Lebanon and denied that Damascus was using its support of the Hezbollah movement as a bargaining chip to pressure Israel.

In his first media interview, Bashar Assad also echoed his father's line when he bitterly criticized Arab states that have signed what he termed "unilateral peace deals" with Israel.

Assad, 34, recently told a Lebanese daily that Lebanese "resistance fighters" had emerged in response to what he called Israeli occupation of its 9-mile-wide security zone in southern Lebanon and said they were defending the honor of all Arabs.

He said Syrian support of anti-Israeli forces in Lebanon is a "national expression of resistance" to the "usurpation of Lebanese land."

A former student of ophthalmology, Assad also said the "Lebanese National Resistance" had "touched Arab feelings and revived nationalist fervor."

"Saying that the resistance is no more than a Syrian bargaining chip, however, dwarfs its role. The resistance is certainly not a bargaining chip in anyone's hand. It is a national expression in reaction to the usurpation of Lebanese land."

Without naming Egypt and Jordan, Assad declared that "unilateral peace deals signed by some Arab states with the enemy have weakened the Arabs' negotiating position immeasurably." But he insisted that Syria would stand firm — alone, if necessary: "Israel made great gains out of these unilateral deals," he said, "and all because of the lack of Arab coordination and consensus." □

Holocaust museum taps insider to direct its 'next stage of growth'

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — After nearly a year without permanent leadership, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum has tapped an insider to be the museum's new executive director.

Sara Bloomfield, a 13-year veteran of the institution and the museum's acting director since last April, was the unanimous choice of a search committee formed in October by the museum's governing body.

"We selected Sara for her fervent dedication to Holocaust remembrance, her longstanding devotion to the museum and its mission, and her proven ability to lead and manage this major international institution," said Miles Lerman, chairman of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council, which voted to give her the job last Friday.

"Such a combination of talents is rare. As this young museum moves into the next stage of its growth and the next century, the council is confident that it does so in highly energetic, capable and caring hands."

Bloomfield, who says she considers herself in many ways a "founding father of the institution," looks at the museum as "the most important accomplishment I have in my life."

"It's a large and complex institution, but more importantly a moral obligation that I look at with deep excitement and with a lot of respect for the challenge it represents," she said in a phone interview this week.

Bloomfield, 48, a native of Cleveland, joined the museum staff in 1986 as deputy director of operations when it was still in the planning stages. She served as executive director of the museum's council from 1988 to 1994, playing a key role in the creation of the museum, which opened its doors in 1993.

Between 1994 and 1998, she served as associate director for museum programs and supervised seven of the museum's offices.

The institution she has helped build has, by all accounts, exceeded the expectations of its founders. During its first five years, the museum welcomed more than 10 million visitors, nearly four times the number initially projected. It has an operating budget of \$53.6 million, 400 staff members and more than 300 volunteers.

Bloomfield's selection, however, comes after a year in which the venerable institution has navigated some rough waters.

She took over as acting director last year after Walter Reich resigned in the wake of a controversy about the handling of an invitation to Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat to tour the museum.

The museum extended the invitation to Arafat, retracted it and extended it again before Arafat ultimately declined. The museum later became embroiled in controversy over its decision to hire John Roth, an internationally renowned Holocaust scholar, to head the museum's new Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies.

The museum was hit by a barrage of criticism from a handful of Jewish individuals, members of Congress and newspaper columnists over a 1988 article Roth authored in which he compared Israeli policies toward the Palestinians with the Nazis' treatment of Jews, as well as other controversial writings.

Roth resigned the post as a result of the uproar, and concerns mounted about whether such controversies would damage the

image and efficacy of the institution.

Bloomfield's work in helping guide the museum through the difficulties of the past year has won praise from museum officials, who expressed confidence that her selection will help the institution turn a corner. For her part, she said this has been "a challenging year in many ways," but noted that as a young institution, "there are still a lot of internal things we're working out."

"I've been here for lots of storms over many years," she said, adding that she brings an understanding of the institution, the original vision of the founders and the different constituencies who all feel a sense of ownership.

Museum insiders say she enjoys a good working relationship with both the museum's council and the staff, and has the respect and admiration of many Holocaust survivors.

Heading into the next century, officials are looking to her administrative skills and passion for the work of Holocaust remembrance to help meet new challenges facing the institution.

For starters, Bloomfield wants to see the museum continue the process it started last year of extending its reach beyond Washington. Bloomfield launched three highly regarded traveling exhibitions, "Liberation 1945," "Hidden History of the Kovno Ghetto" and "The Nazi Olympics Berlin 1936," and says she wants to build on those to make the museum a national presence.

In addition to expanding its educational outreach, the museum is also looking to its new Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies as a training center for a new cadre of Holocaust scholars.

"I believe the museum has a very important role to play serving as a catalyst for this field," Bloomfield said.

But perhaps the biggest challenge facing the institution, she said, "is keeping the resonance and the vitality alive as the Holocaust recedes in memory and the survivors and other eyewitnesses pass from the scene." How to go about doing that, she said, is a "major challenge for which I don't have all the answers, but I do know it's the question to be asking." □

Australian victim launches suit for Maccabiah injuries

By Jeremy Jones

SYDNEY, Australia (JTA) — A young Australian woman who has had close to 30 operations and spent much of her life in the hospital since the collapse of the foot bridge at the opening ceremony of the Maccabiah Games in Israel in 1997 is suing the organizers of the games.

Sasha Elterman, who had gone to the games to compete in the tennis tournament, has lodged the first civil suit over the tragedy.

A trial for criminal negligence by the organizing committee, the bridge engineers and contractors is already under way, as is an Israeli parliamentary inquiry.

Her family's Israeli lawyer, Pinas Saltzer, has put a figure of approximately \$3 million on the expenses incurred so far in treating her injuries. He said that figure will increase in the future amid signs that Elterman will continue to suffer chronic effects from infections acquired while beneath the surface of the Yarkon River.

The family is suing 19 parties, including the organizers of the games, the city of Ramat Gan, where they were held, and those involved in the building of the bridge. □