



Daily News Bulletin

Vol. 77, No. 49

Monday, March 15, 1999

82nd Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Cabinet rejects E.U. stance

The Israeli Cabinet rejected Sunday what it said was a challenge by the European Union to Israeli sovereignty over Jerusalem. The move came after Germany's ambassador to Israel, whose country holds the rotating E.U. presidency, last week wrote a letter stating that the group views Jerusalem as a separate entity from Israel. [Page 3]

U.S. official meets Syrians

The U.S. assistant secretary of state for Middle Eastern affairs sought ways to restart the Israeli-Syrian negotiations during a Sunday meeting in Damascus with Syrian officials. Martin Indyk also sought ways to defuse tensions in Lebanon, where Syria is the leading power broker.

Top pick for new entity bows out

A leading contender for the top professional spot at North American Jewry's new consolidated fundraising and service organization requested, "for personal reasons," that his name be withdrawn from consideration.

Steven Nasatir, president of the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago, was rumored to be the top choice as president of the entity comprising the United Jewish Appeal, the Council of Jewish Federations and the United Israel Appeal. A statement by the search committee co-chairs announcing Nasatir's withdrawal gave no date for a final appointment, but the merger of the three organizations is set to become official by mid-April.

Report: Syria, Iraq sign deal

Syria secretly agreed to supply military equipment to Iraq, according to Middle East intelligence sources quoted in the London Times.

The deal between the Syrian and Iraqi intelligence services will involve military equipment worth some \$100 million, the sources said. [Page 3]

House introduces hate crime law

U.S. congressional lawmakers introduced legislation last week to strengthen the ability of authorities to investigate and prosecute hate crimes. The legislation, which has bipartisan support, would help law enforcement officials pursue crimes committed because of a victim's sexual orientation, gender or disability.

Concern over pluralism in Israel spreads to Jews across the globe

By Avi Machlis

JERUSALEM (JTA) — After Friday night services conclude at Congregation Israelita Paulista in Sao Paulo, Brazil, and some 1,000 members of the Reform temple mill about and socialize, conversation often turns to the latest news about the pluralism conflict in Israel.

"There is a lot of talk about the issues in Israel, especially over the past few months," says Rabbi Henry Sobel, who heads Latin America's biggest synagogue.

"People want to hear what the rabbis have to say. Even though the reality is very far from Israel, Brazilian Jews feel tremendously affected. What sustains Jews in the Third World is Israel and Israeli society."

Sobel was among the group of Reform rabbis from around the world who gathered in Jerusalem last week for the World Union for Progressive Judaism's 29th international convention.

The pluralism battle in Israel topped the agenda at the meeting of the Reform movement's world body and dominated talk in the corridors, especially issues such as the recognition of conversions performed by the liberal streams and the right of non-Orthodox Israelis to serve on municipal religious councils — topics that have been straining Israel-Diaspora relations.

The "Diaspora" referred to in that context is usually North America, home to the world's largest Jewish community.

But shots in the pluralism battle are being heard around the world. From Brazil to Beijing, Jewish communities are finding they cannot ignore the issue.

Of course, Jews often face social and economic problems that are shared by the non-Jewish residents in the country in which they live.

In Brazil, for example, a severe economic crisis that has shaken the country tops the agenda of the Jewish community of 125,000.

But "the No. 1 Jewish issue is the divisions between Jews in Israeli society," says Sobel.

Brazilian Jews perceive the issue very differently than their counterparts in the United States, Sobel says.

Brazilian Jews do not consider Orthodox attempts in Israel to retain their monopoly over personal-status issues such as marriage and divorce as a personal insult, but are concerned about how the conflict in Israel could affect the dynamics of their own community, in which Orthodox and liberal Jews coexist peacefully.

"Brazilian society in general is very tolerant, and this spirit of togetherness has rubbed off in the best possible way on Jewish society," says Sobel, who has launched a dialogue program for "moderate liberal" and "moderate Orthodox" Jews in his country.

"The concern among Latin American Jews is about how the debate in Israel might prompt the local Orthodox community to become more aggressive. People are worried that if this goes on, and there is a so-called civil war between Jews and Jews in Israel, it could be exported to our country."

In Great Britain, Reform Jews — which make up about 25 per cent of the country's Jewish population of 200,000 — are also closely monitoring the pluralism debate.

Like Jews in the United States, British Jews feel insulted by the way Israel's Orthodox establishment is treating liberal Jews. In Europe and Britain, "people are increasingly disturbed by what they read in the papers," according to Dr. Leo Hepner,

MIDEAST FOCUS

Palestinians laud Ross' remarks

Palestinian officials applauded remarks by U.S. Middle East peace envoy Dennis Ross describing Jewish settlement activity as "very destructive to the pursuit of peace."

After Ross made the comment last Friday, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's spokesman, David Bar-Illan, reiterated that Israel would continue to support settlement expansion in the West Bank and Gaza Strip to accommodate the natural growth of Israelis living there.

Lebanese go on alert

The Lebanese government went on alert Saturday when Israeli military helicopters were spotted flying deep inside Lebanon. Israeli army officials confirmed the sorties, but would not state whether they were ferrying commandos on a mission or merely providing a show of force.

Lebanon has been bracing for Israeli reprisals since Hezbollah gunmen recently killed seven Israelis, including a general, in the security zone.

Israeli right unites for elections

Three Israeli parties that reject any land for peace deals with the Palestinians formally joined in a right-wing alliance last Friday in hopes of winning seats in the Knesset to maximize their strength.

The bloc is led by Ze'ev "Benny" Begin, who quit Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government in 1997, and includes Rehavam Ze'evi, head of the Moledet Party, and Hanan Porat, who heads a new settlers party called Tekumah.

Intel sets up lab in Israel

The high-tech company Intel established a laboratory at the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology. Research by Technion students performed at the laboratory will belong to the company, which has operations in Israel.



Daily News Bulletin

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JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN is published five days a week, except holidays, by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency Inc., 330 Seventh Ave., New York, N.Y. 10001-5010. For information about how to subscribe by e-mail, fax or regular mail, call (212) 643-1890, or visit our Web site at www.jta.org.
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a London Reform Jew and the chairman of the European region of the World Union for Progressive Judaism.

"Reform Jews in Britain are very proud of their status," he says. "They have followed liberal and progressive Judaism for many generations, and the implication by the Orthodox establishment in Israel that Reform Judaism is a synthetic form of Judaism and an import from the West is insulting."

"The average man in the synagogue is so worried that he tends now to say, 'If my donations are used for this kind of thing, I would rather keep my funds at home,'" says Hepner.

In some ways, says Hepner, British Jews are even more aware of what is happening in Israel than U.S. Jews, since the United Kingdom is just a four-hour flight from Israel, and many British Jews frequently travel to Israel to vacation or visit friends and family.

In South Africa, Reform Jews are keeping in touch with what goes on in Israel, but they are somewhat less concerned about the issue because the transition from apartheid has led to enormous domestic turmoil and a sharp upswing in violent crime.

Rabbi Hillel Avidan, a pulpit rabbi at a Reform synagogue in Johannesburg and chairman of the Southern African Association of Progressive Rabbis, says domestic turmoil and an affirmative action program that is making it difficult for whites to find jobs is causing many of South Africa's 80,000 Jews to emigrate.

Last year, some 2,000 Jews left the country, mostly to Australia. Only a small percentage chose Israel.

Most go to Australia for economic reasons.

But for liberal Jews, says Rabbi Avidan, the pluralism issue can add another deterrent to aliyah.

"It is even more of a deterrent in families where one partner is married to someone who converted under the auspices of a Reform conversion," says Avidan, even though he explains to potential immigrants to Israel that the Jewish state recognizes Reform conversions performed in the Diaspora.

"Still, many converts tend to think of themselves as second class Jews, because they start to believe what the Orthodox tell them."

Despite the domestic turmoil, Avidan tries to keep his community in the know about the latest events in the pluralism battle.

"When I told the community that [Israeli authors] Amos Oz and A.B. Yehoshua encouraged Israelis to join the Reform movement, that really gave them a lift," Avidan says.

Even in Hong Kong, the community of 3,000 Jews — mostly expatriate businessmen, journalists and academics from North America — cannot ignore the pluralism debate.

Rabbi Jordan Cohen, from the United Jewish Congregation of Hong Kong, says the community's interest in the issue stems from its own internal struggles. "There is a lot of tension between us," he says, adding that the Orthodox and Reform Jews find themselves competing for space in the local Jewish community center.

Cohen says most of the North American expatriates were never confronted with these issues at home, where, he says, liberal communities feel less threatened by the Orthodox. "But they came to Hong Kong, and all of a sudden it's an issue," he says.

"When the Reform movement scores a victory in Israel, they feel very enabled in Hong Kong." □

Defense secretary thanks Israelis

JERUSALEM (JTA) — U.S. Defense Secretary William Cohen concluded a weeklong trip to the Middle East last Friday by participating in a ceremony in Israel to thank Israeli soldiers who responded to the bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Kenya last summer.

Cohen told members of the Israeli military rescue team they "showed the world that amidst the debris of cruelty there is a compassion that has the power to restore."

During his visit, Cohen discussed with Israeli officials the prospect of more U.S. funding for the \$1.6 billion Arrow missile project, which Israel hopes will help thwart any ballistic missile attacks. □

JEWISH WORLD

David Duke publishes book

A former leader of the Ku Klux Klan running for the House of Representatives in Louisiana is publishing a new book that says a revolution to "free" white people is "justified by the highest laws of Nature and God."

David Duke, who is running for the seat vacated late last year by Republican Bob Livingston, was more outspokenly racist in the self-published volume, "My Awakening," than in his prior attempts for higher office.

Swiss delay refugee findings

A Swiss panel of historians will release its findings about the nation's wartime refugees policy at the end of the year, more than a year later than originally planned, according to a Swiss newspaper.

Switzerland expelled more than 30,000 Jews during World War II, most of whom died.

At the same time, however, the Alpine nation provided haven to some 25,000 Jewish refugees, who survived the war together with Switzerland's 20,000 Jewish citizens.

Ex-slaves threaten more suits

Former Nazi-era slave laborers in Poland will file new lawsuits in the United States pressing Germany for a faster settlement to claims dating back to the Holocaust era, according to a Polish governmental official.

Polish Chief of Staff Jerzy Widzyk, who made the announcement last Friday after meeting with U.S. lawyers who represent Jewish and Polish former slave laborers, added that his government would continue to talk with Germany about compensation for the laborers.

Polish officials estimate the unpaid salaries for Polish slaves during World War II amount to \$25.2 billion at current exchange rates.

In the face of international pressure, German firms recently pledged to establish to set up a compensation fund for such laborers., but the amount of the fund has yet to be determined.

Group to monitor millennialists

A Jewish anti-missionary group launched a committee to monitor activity linked to the turn of the millennium that could adversely affect Jews.

"Unfortunately, Jews and the land of Israel play a major role" in millennialist theologies, the Task Force on Missionaries and Cults of the New York Jewish Community Relations Committee said in announcing the monitoring project.

The effort is an outgrowth of a Jan. 25 scholarly conference on the potential effects of the turn of the millennium on the Jewish community.

Israel's Cabinet firmly rejects E.U. stance regarding Jerusalem

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli officials are up in arms regarding a statement from the current leadership of the European Union that questions Israel's sovereignty over Jerusalem.

During its weekly meeting Sunday, the Cabinet rejected what it said was a challenge by the European Union to Israeli control over all of Jerusalem.

The E.U. stand questions long-established facts on the ground, the ministers agreed during the meeting, adding that they oppose any partition or internationalization of the city.

The issue erupted after Germany's ambassador to Israel, Theodor Wallau, last week wrote a letter to the Israeli Foreign Ministry about the status of the city.

Wallau, whose country currently holds the rotating E.U. presidency, stated that the European Union considers Jerusalem a separate entity from Israel under the terms of the 1947 partition plan.

Because of this position, he added, E.U. diplomats are not forced to comply with Israeli directives in the city.

Wallau was responding to a letter issued last month by the Foreign Ministry requesting that foreign diplomats not meet with Palestinian Authority officials in the capital.

That letter reminded the diplomats that the future of Jerusalem is to be determined in final-status negotiations, and that the Oslo accords bar the Palestinian Authority from conducting business in Jerusalem.

In recent years, Israel has repeatedly called on foreign envoys not to meet with Palestinian representatives at Orient House, the Palestinians' de facto headquarters in eastern Jerusalem.

Netanyahu met with Wallau on Sunday to express Israel's displeasure with the E.U. stand.

Netanyahu told the ambassador that the "clock would not be turned back" and that Jerusalem would never be partitioned again.

Officials at the German Embassy later said the ambassador was merely reiterating the E.U. position on Jerusalem, which has long been known to Israel.

The dispute comes against the backdrop of Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat's plans to declare an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital.

The Palestine Liberation Organization's governing bodies are expected to meet next month in the self-rule areas to decide whether Arafat should declare Palestinian statehood in May. □

Syria, Iraq sign military agreement

LONDON (JTA) — Syria has secretly agreed to supply military equipment to Iraq, according to Middle East intelligence sources quoted in the London Times.

The deal between the Syrian and Iraqi intelligence services will involve military equipment worth some \$100 million, the sources said.

Under the agreement, Syrian spare parts for military equipment would be converted for use by the Iraqi army, the sources said. The parts would include engines for Russian-made tanks and tracks for armored fighting vehicles.

Iraqi President Saddam Hussein has faced a severe shortage of spare parts for his army as a result of the international arms embargo imposed after the 1991 Gulf War.

Syria is also expected to supply equipment for anti-aircraft radar facilities — hit by recent U.S. and British bombing — as well as trucks, aircraft, helicopters and ammunition.

Relations between Syria and Iraq, once considered regional arch-rivals, are reported to have improved significantly in recent months.

The two countries have already agreed to develop political and economic ties. □

FOCUS ON ISSUES**Yad Vashem works feverishly to computerize names of victims***By Bill Gladstone*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Faced with a deadline of March 31, an army of some 1,200 data entry clerks, software technicians, Holocaust scholars and other specialists are working feverishly to computerize the names of 3 million Holocaust victims from a collection of documents at the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem.

Recognizing that a need might eventually arise for a thorough inventory of Holocaust victims, Yad Vashem officials began to conceptualize such a project years ago.

But the museum went into high gear earlier this year, when it received \$8 million in funding from the Swiss Bankers Association and the World Jewish Congress to provide such a list to the Volcker Commission, a panel of experts seeking to track Holocaust victims' unclaimed assets in Swiss banks.

"It's a fascinating convergence of interests," said Dr. Ya'acov Lozowick, director of the Yad Vashem archives.

"We've been dreaming of this for a long time and would have done it at our own sedentary rate until the Volcker Commission came along and wanted it done right away," he said. "Yad Vashem could have lived with doing this over two years. But if it has to be done in three months, then so be it."

With the Volcker Commission demanding the list by the end of March so it can wrap up its efforts, Yad Vashem officials have mobilized huge numbers of personnel, taken over a whole floor in an office building in the Jerusalem suburb of Givat Shaul and rented more temporary space in Beersheba for the duration of the project.

Beginning in January, Israel's famous Holocaust institution spent weeks in detailed logistical planning and hired a software company, Softel, to design a specialized software tool to handle the more than 3 million "Pages of Testimony" that Yad Vashem has collected from relatives of Holocaust victims since the early 1950s.

Since February, workers at Yad Vashem have been feeding some 50,000 of the Pages of Testimony through two high-speed scanners every day, while 14 teams of data entry clerks in Jerusalem and Beersheba, working from early morning to late at night, are keyboarding in details from the handwritten pages after their high-resolution scanned images appear on the computer screens.

Recognizing the inevitability of transcription errors and difficulties in reading the Hebrew, English, Polish and other languages in which the Pages of Testimony were originally scrawled, Yad Vashem officials have devised a thorough system of checks.

Whenever a surname or place name is entered for the first time, for instance, that particular record is electronically sent to one of a hierarchy of specialists, who check it against thorough master lists that the institution has compiled over many years.

The specialists also have at their fingertips lists of vocations, family relations, family status and titles in as many as 12 languages. Entering the English word "shoemaker," for example, produces a chart showing translations of that vocation into a dozen languages, including four variants in the Serbian tongue alone.

Specialists may also engage in "data mining," allowing them to establish correlations, for example, between names and places.

In Hungary, for instance, Jews with the first name "Abraham" apparently often used the name "Adolf" in official documents, such as when opening bank accounts.

Standing at the front of a large room in which some 70 data entry clerks are sitting at computer terminals arranged in a large U-formation, Lozowick seems as busy as an army general, one moment engaged in brisk dialogue by cell phone, the next inspecting a minor software glitch on his laptop computer.

Have he and his team encountered any unexpected problems?

"Yes — about 25 a minute," he said. "Actually, today is the first full day where everything seems to be working well."

Yad Vashem recently turned over to the Volcker Commission a list of the first 1 million names, which were then matched with existing lists of owners of dormant bank accounts. Using only the simplest methods of matching, some 3,000 dormant bank accounts were identified as having belonged to Jews who perished in the Holocaust. According to Lozowick, more accounts will be identified now that Yad Vashem is employing its computerized lists of variants of names and locations.

As part of its overall effort to compile a comprehensive computerized inventory of Holocaust victims, Yad Vashem has gone far beyond the Pages of Testimony located in the facility's Hall of Names.

It has also drawn up a master list of some 8,163 other lists of Holocaust victims, containing a total of more than 12 million occurrences of names.

Nearly 2,000 more lists compiled by the Red Cross' International Tracing Service in Arolsen, Germany, contain an additional 6 million names, bringing the total on Yad Vashem's "List of Lists" to roughly 18 million occurrences of names on some 10,000 lists.

The lists include many duplicates. For instance, a Czech Jew who possessed a life insurance policy, had a business confiscated and was eventually deported to Theresienstadt and then Auschwitz and Dachau, might show up five times — but Lozowick asserts that the various lists make it possible, for the first time, to name at least 5 million of the estimated 6 million Jews who perished in the Holocaust.

Yad Vashem is making every effort not to duplicate the smaller-scale computerization efforts of other institutions such as Steven Spielberg's Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation and The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, said Lozowick. "Any of these institutions that give us the results of what they've done, we give them what we've done. It's a win-win situation."

So far, according to Lozowick, Yad Vashem has entered into co-operative arrangements with about eight other institutions, including the Bergen-Belsen Museum, which has provided a list of 23,000 Jewish inmates, and the Swiss Federal Archives, which has supplied a list of 24,000 names of Jews who entered Switzerland during the Nazi era.

As they prepare to turn over an additional 2 million computerized names to the Volcker Commission, Yad Vashem officials are engaged in discussions with other sponsors to allow the project to continue beyond that date. "We're making a huge effort not to have this massive effort grind to a halt in April," Lozowick said.

Before the end of the year, Yad Vashem plans to make its computerized list of Holocaust victims available on the Internet to help researchers and relatives searching for family members killed in the Shoah, Lozowick said. □