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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

U.S. censures Russian firms

The United States imposed sanctions on three Russian firms for supplying anti-tank weapons to Syria, which Washington accuses of sponsoring terrorism.

U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright determined that the Russian government was involved in the deal, but did not slap sanctions on it, a move that preserved \$90 million in U.S. aid to Moscow. Explaining last Friday's decision, State Department spokesman James Rubin said excluding the Russian government from the sanctions was in the "national interest."

Riot police patrol Nazareth

Israeli riot police patrolled the streets of Nazareth on Monday, urging residents to remain indoors as Arab residents observed a general strike.

The police clampdown came one day after at least seven people were injured during confrontations between Christians and Muslims that coincided with the Easter holiday.

The dispute centered on a site near the Basilica of the Annunciation, the holiest Christian site in Israel's largest Arab town, where Muslims want to build a mosque.

CJF approves merger

The Council of Jewish Federations approved its merger with the United Jewish Appeal and the United Israel Appeal.

Two of the 117 federations participating in the conference-call vote abstained. The vote represents the final organizational approval required for the union, scheduled to be announced at a meeting next week in Washington.

Poll: Israelis back statehood

Some 55 percent of Israeli Jews polled believe that the Palestinians deserve an independent state, according to the annual "peace index" survey conducted by Tel Aviv University's Tami Steinmetz Center.

But the poll found a strong majority oppose giving any portion of Jerusalem over to Palestinian rule. It also found, for the first time since the poll was conducted four years ago, that a majority of Israeli Jews do not believe the Palestinians are seeking the destruction of Israel.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Balkan crisis evokes images from the Holocaust and Exodus

By Ruth E. Gruber

BUDAPEST (JTA) — The NATO attack on Yugoslavia, and the horrific Kosovo refugee crisis that now affects several Balkan states, have sent echoes of both the Holocaust and the Exodus from Egypt resounding through the world this Passover.

Jews themselves play only an incidental role in the current conflict, but the symbolism of Jews and their historic suffering is clear.

Both sides — NATO as well as the Yugoslav government of President Slobodan Milosevic — have accused the other of using Nazi tactics and have compared each other's leaders to Hitler.

In the West, intensely emotional buzzwords like "genocide" and "camps" serve to characterize the brutality of Serbian ethnic cleansing in Kosovo.

Shocking TV footage of crowded train cars filled with desperate ethnic Albanians forced from their homes call up images of grainy film showing the deportations to Auschwitz during the Shoah.

In Belgrade, where the air strikes on the city are the first since the Nazi bombardments of World War II, slogans label President Clinton as "Bill Hitler" and Serbian officials compare the "onslaught of Clinton's and NATO's neo-Nazis" to the German bombings.

State-controlled Yugoslav media do not report on the scope of the refugee crisis.

If the current exodus is mentioned at all, it is described as people fleeing NATO bombs or Kosovo Liberation Army "terrorism." Nor is the humanitarian disaster presented as a reason for the NATO strikes.

The message is solely that — as in World War II — tiny Serbia is defending its sovereignty against the brutal might of the most powerful nation on earth.

The Serbs stress that unlike Croatia, which during World War II was ruled as a Nazi puppet state of homegrown fascists and actively carried out anti-Jewish persecutions, Serbia opposed the Nazis.

One of the bridges destroyed by NATO missiles in Novi Sad, one Serb official pointed out, was the bridge on which the Nazis executed Jews and Serbs and threw their bodies into the Danube.

Along with these comparisons, the perception — and use — of Jews as a moral voice in the current conflict is also apparent.

"As a Jew, I feel I must speak up," Holocaust survivor and Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel told CNN, echoing the sentiment he had earlier expressed to JTA.

Wiesel called on the world to step in to help the ethnic Albanian victims. But he declined to equate the Serbian ethnic cleansing in Kosovo as Nazi-style genocide in the full sense of the word.

Despite the horrors and atrocities, he said, Milosevic's aim was not to kill all ethnic Albanians.

In Belgrade, meanwhile, Jews have been placed in a delicate situation. About 3,000 Jews live in Serbia, most of them in the capital. Regardless of what they may feel about the situation in Kosovo or about Milosevic, they feel they are sharing the fate of their fellow Serbs in general.

"We are affected [by the bombing] the same way as everyone else," said a Jewish man in Belgrade who has long opposed Milosevic.

The small Jewish communities in Kosovo and Macedonia reported as of Monday

MIDEAST FOCUS

Candidate could be disqualified

Members of Israel's Central Elections Committee recommended that Rabbi Yosef Ba-Gad be disqualified from running for prime minister in May.

The committee found that many of the signatures on the petitions supporting Ba-Gad's candidacy were forged.

"At 23,000 forgeries, we stopped counting," an Elections Committee official said Sunday of Ba-Gad's petitions.

A final decision on Ba-Gad's candidacy is expected from the full committee next week.

Israel issues closure notices

Israeli police issued closure orders Sunday against three Palestinian institutions operating in eastern Jerusalem.

The three organizations, including a group lobbying on behalf of Palestinian prisoners, an office of the Wafa Palestinian news agency and the office of a Palestinian Authority official on religious affairs, planned to appeal the orders.

An Israeli ministerial committee called for the closures last week as part of a stepped-up effort by Israel to curb Palestinian activity in the eastern half of the capital.

Also on Sunday, a delegation of Israeli peace activists presented the leading Palestinian official in Jerusalem, Faisal Husseini, with a petition signed by 520 Israelis supporting the Palestinians' right to declare a state in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and eastern half of Jerusalem.

Israeli couple sues hospital

An Israeli couple sued a hospital for damages after discovering that their biological son was switched with another baby 23 years ago.

The couple is suing the Hillel Yaffe Hospital, accusing it of denying them the chance to raise their biological son.

that they felt safe and did not wish to be evacuated despite the worsening situation there.

Even before the bloody breakup of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, Milosevic's Serbia sought to win world Jewish — and Western — support for its policies by courting the Jews and Israel.

That effort intensified as the wars in Croatia and Bosnia intensified.

A Serbian-Israel Friendship Association was established, and Serbia's relatively friendly historical relationship to the Jews in contrast to Croatia's pro-Nazi anti-Semitism was frequently recalled.

Israel established full relations with Serbia in late 1996, nearly a year before it established relations with Croatia.

During the Balkan wars in the early 1990s, Yugoslavia's Jews, fearing manipulation, attempted to steer clear of any active political role.

The community expressed no official stance, although individual members of the community spoke out privately against the Milosevic regime.

The tightly controlled Serbian media last week again demonstrated the moral character ascribed to Jewish positions.

It prominently displayed an appeal by the Federation of Jewish Communities in Yugoslavia that condemned the NATO bombing and urged Israel and international Jewish organizations to help mediate a peaceful, political solution to the crisis.

"The bombing hurts all Yugoslav citizens, including Jews, as we also are citizens of Yugoslavia," the March 28 statement said.

"Bombs and missiles do not select victims according to national or religious criteria. The Federation and members of the Jewish community in Yugoslavia condemn the bombing, and request that it be stopped at once," it said.

"They are in favor of a peaceful, political solution of the Kosovo problem, with guarantees for full equality of all its citizens and all national, ethnic and religious groups, of highest level of autonomy, and against changing of any borders by force," it said.

"Today, the Federation requested the Government of the State of Israel, the World Jewish Congress and the European Jewish Congress to use their influence at the international level in order to stop the bombing of Yugoslavia by NATO forces and to support the peaceful, political solution of the Kosovo problem," it added.

The WJC said it had received the appeal from the Yugoslav Jews and would "take it up at the highest level" after the Passover holiday.

The group's executive director, Elan Steinberg, called the Yugoslav Jewish community "courageous" and said the WJC is in a difficult situation because its membership includes Jewish communities from around the world, all of whom must be consulted before a position can be taken.

In the strictly Jewish context, meanwhile, the current crisis sparked an international cooperative effort that marked what some see as a milestone in the revival of Jewish communal life and sensibilities in former Communist Europe. More than 200 Yugoslav Jews fled to Hungary in buses rented by the Jewish community as part of a contingency plan worked out by Hungarian and Yugoslav Jewish leaders last year.

"Months before the air strikes, we agreed that we would help the Yugoslav young people," said Gusztav Zoltai, head of the Federation of Hungarian Jewish Communities. "All we have done is to put Jewish solidarity into action."

Most of the evacuees were children and teen-agers sent out of the country by their parents to ride out the NATO air strikes in safety.

Unlike the ethnic Albanians fleeing Kosovo, the Yugoslav Jews do not consider themselves refugees, nor were they escaping persecution.

The JDC and the European Council of Jewish Communities were also coordinating potential assistance from other European Jewish communities.

"Since the Holocaust, most of the Jewish communities in Communist Europe were being helped by their brothers in the West," said Israel Sela, director of the Hungary office of the JDC. "This is the first time that a Jewish community in one former Communist state has directly helped another Jewish community in the region."

For those who stayed in Belgrade, few Jews came to a community seder last week because of the bombings. □



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Caryn Rosen Adelman, *President*
Mark J. Jaffe, *Executive Editor and Publisher*
Lisa Hostein, *Editor*
Lenore A. Silverstein, *Business Manager*

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JEWISH WORLD

Sharon to visit Moscow again

Israeli Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon is planning to make a second trip to Moscow within a month to press Russian officials to block the sale of ballistic missile technology to Iran.

In meetings with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Sharon said he is disappointed with American efforts to limit the sales and prefers direct Israeli discussions with Moscow to resolve the issue, according to the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz*.

Polish victims to sue Germany

A group representing some 22,000 Polish victims of the Holocaust plans to sue the German government for about \$1.2 billion.

The group includes former Nazi slave laborers and concentration camp prisoners. Their lawsuit is expected to put more pressure on the German government, which is overseeing an effort by 12 German firms to create a fund to compensate the laborers.

Search ends with grim discovery

The search for the executive director of a Jewish old-age home in Connecticut was called off when his body was discovered in a Colorado lake. Local police said Rick Wallace had drowned accidentally after drinking alcohol.

Wallace, who worked for the Jewish Home for the Aged in New Haven, Conn., disappeared March 14 while attending a conference in Colorado of the Association of Jewish Aging Services.

TV discrimination suit nears end

Final arguments were delivered Monday in a New Jersey court hearing a discrimination case brought by a television journalist. Sara Lee Kessler is claiming, among other things, that the management of WWOR-TV fired her shortly after she filed a complaint that the station had failed to take her Sabbath observance into account when making assignments.

VW payments top \$1 million

Volkswagen has paid out more than \$1.2 million from a humanitarian fund it established last September for those survivors who worked as slave laborers for the German firm during World War II.

According to a company spokesman, more than half of the 219 recipients of the fund live in Israel, the Netherlands and France.

Advocate of Ethiopian Jews dies

An American credited with helping relocate tens of thousands of Ethiopians to Israel died March 31 at the age of 90. Graenum Berger, who founded the American Association for Ethiopian Jews in the 1970s, lobbied the Jewish state to accept Ethiopian Jews.

Britain's first war crimes trial ends with conviction of retiree

By Douglas Davis

LONDON (JTA) — British Jewish leaders are hailing the two life sentences given a man convicted of murdering 18 Jews during World War II while serving in a Nazi-allied police unit in Belarus.

After a two-month trial in Britain's first war crimes prosecution, Anthony Sawoniuk, a 78-year-old retired British railroad ticket collector, was convicted last week on two separate charges: murdering two Jewish men and a woman; and shooting 15 women with a submachine gun after ordering them to strip and face an open grave.

Sawoniuk, who settled into a life of domestic anonymity here in 1946 after fleeing with the retreating German soldiers from his home in the Belarus village of Domachevo, was also implicated in, though not charged with, the murders of children and an infant, as well as having taken part in a Yom Kippur massacre.

Lord Janner of Braunstone, chairman of the Holocaust Educational Trust, said he was "very glad that this murderer has received a fair trial and that justice was both done and seen to be done.

"The Nazis gave neither trial nor justice to their victims," he said.

The trial followed extensive investigations by a team of police and historians that was set up after the landmark War Crimes Act was passed in 1991.

The law, which provoked a wave of controversy among senior members of the legal community because it was enacted after the crimes were committed, gave British courts jurisdiction over non-Britons for crimes against non-Britons on non-British soil under Nazi occupation.

The investigation has cost a total of some \$18 million, and although one other case is still under investigation, it is considered highly unlikely that further trials will be held.

Lord Janner, who helped steer the War Crimes Act through Parliament, defended the expense.

"We don't count the cost of murder trials — it is a question of justice," he said.

Thousands of men from Eastern and Central Europe were allowed to enter Britain virtually unscreened in the immediate aftermath of the war in order to ease a critical labor shortage.

Many, like Sawoniuk — a paradigm of what are described as the "small fish" of the Holocaust — are now believed to have used this opportunity to escape from their hometowns and villages after perpetrating war crimes.

The eight-year investigation into possible war criminals in Britain has involved 376 suspects. Of those, 117 were dead; and in an additional 257 cases, investigations were dropped either because of insufficient evidence or because the suspects were too old and too ill to be questioned and prosecuted.

Neville Nagler, director general of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, the umbrella body for the Jewish community, cited the latest headlines from Kosovo as he applauded Sawoniuk's April 1 conviction.

"This should stand as a warning to those who now engage in war crimes, whether in Yugoslavia or elsewhere.

"Justice has finally been secured for the Jewish inhabitants of Domachevo," Nagler added. "His trial and conviction have justified the cost and effort involved in bringing war criminals to justice."

Sawoniuk, the illiterate, illegitimate son of a washerwoman in Domachevo, volunteered to join the local police force established by the Nazis who occupied the predominantly Jewish, prosperous spa village in 1941.

Virtually all of the 2,900 Jews in the village were rounded up and shot on Sept. 19 — Yom Kippur — 1942. In the aftermath of the slaughter, Sawoniuk headed a unit that was assigned to search for and kill those Jews who had escaped the roundup.

During the trial, the judge instructed the jury to drop two other charges because of a lack of evidence.

The verdict came as Jews throughout the world were celebrating Passover, the festival of the Exodus from Egypt. □

Parisian branch of British bank offered to turn Jews in during war

By Douglas Davis

LONDON (JTA) — The manager of the French branch of Britain's leading commercial bank, Barclays, not only acted as the Nazis' banker during World War II but also volunteered to hand over Jewish staff members, according to documents found in the U.S. National Archives.

The materials were located by researchers working on a BBC television documentary, "Banking With Hitler," which examined the role of European banks during the war. According to the material, senior officials at the bank's Paris branch "volunteered" information about its Jewish employees to the Nazis and helped to arrange financing for projects that aided the Nazi war effort.

The records also show the bank received a substantial cash deposit from the Drancy transit camp, located near Paris, where valuables were plundered from Jews bound for Auschwitz.

The full extent of the bank's involvement with the occupying Nazis has never been fully investigated, but Barclays has acknowledged that of the 16,000 accounts held by its Paris branch in 1941, some 335 depositors may have been Jewish.

Facing the prospect of a lawsuit last year from survivors living in the United States, the bank announced in December that it was establishing a \$3 million fund to repay unclaimed assets held by its Paris branch.

According to the material in the National Archives, U.S. Treasury officials who conducted an investigation in France immediately after the war discovered a close collaboration between the British bank's French officials and the Nazis.

Their report says that bank manager Marcel Cheradame had been "very amenable to the wishes of the German administrator, Hans Joachim Caesar." Barclays continued to employ Cheradame as its Paris manager until he retired in the 1960s.

One of the most startling findings was that a French official of Barclays told Caesar that the bank had a few Jewish employees — and, surprisingly, Caesar rejected the information.

Barclays denies that it had any knowledge of the activities of its Paris branch during World War II. □

BEYOND THE RED SEA

Jews in Russia reinterpret meaning of Pesach — again

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — When David Karpov attended his first Passover seder here some 15 years ago, it was easy for him and other newcomers to grasp the holiday's main themes of slavery and redemption.

Soviet Jews, themselves suffering from oppression, had no trouble making a connection between their lives and what they read in the Haggadah, says Karpov, now a Lubavitch rabbi in Moscow.

"Egypt was the Soviet Union, the Pharaoh was its leadership and Moses was the State of Israel, which helped to redeem people," explains Zinovy Kogan, executive director of the Congress of Jewish Organizations and Communities of Russia, an umbrella group for Russian Jews.

This year marks the 10th anniversary of the beginning of the

mass departure of Soviet Jews to Israel — the wave often referred to in the Jewish state as the "Big Aliyah."

The abolition of most restrictions on emigration — a move associated with the policy of glasnost, or openness, instituted by then-Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev — seemed to be a fulfillment of Passover hopes and dreams. In the Western hemisphere and in Israel, a mass campaign for the liberation of Soviet Jews was inspired by another Passover symbol, the phrase Moses addressed to the Pharaoh: "Let My People Go."

As with so much in this fast-changing part of the world, the meaning of Passover seders has changed several times during the past decade and a half. And with aliyah beginning to rise because of the surge of anti-Semitism that followed the collapse of the Russian economy in August, some here are wondering if the themes of this year's celebrations will shift yet again.

During the Soviet era, Passover seders actually inspired some Jews to consider emigration.

"For some, those seders were an eye-opener. People would come with no wish to emigrate and leave full of information and other people's personal stories," says Kogan.

Large seders held at private apartments became common in the early 1970s, says Mikhail Chlenov, president of the Va'ad, the Russian Jewish Federation, another umbrella organization for Jews here. Indeed, the 1970s and 1980s were like an ongoing Passover, says Kogan.

"Some people were leaving, some stayed behind and continued the struggle. The idea of Pesach, exodus and freedom permeated the air," he says.

As if the Soviet authorities themselves wanted to convey the message of Passover to those who had come to a seder, police, tipped off by the KGB, would sometimes break into an apartment to check the identity cards of those in attendance.

"To many of us, the Passover Haggadah was a manual for emigration," says Kogan. He recalls how seders in the late 1980s and early 1990s coincided with emotional send-offs people gave their friends who were about to leave for Israel.

In more recent years, as aliyah from the former Soviet Union began to subside, seders took on a less dramatic character: They became events to teach Jews about Jewish history, about community-building and about Hebrew.

"Everything is open now," says Karpov. "Every single aspect of Judaism is available to anyone."

Many agree that Russian Jewry today is more about spiritual rather than physical redemption. But responding to the rise in anti-Semitism, many people are again wondering whether to emigrate.

"The atmosphere to some extent reminds me of the times of the Big Aliyah," says Chaim Ben-Yakov, a Moscow rabbi.

Ben-Yakov, a 31-year-old native of Moscow, immigrated to Israel 10 years ago. Last year, he returned to work on behalf of the World Union for Progressive Judaism, an international organization for Reform Judaism.

But despite the rise in anti-Semitism, he does not believe that bad times for Jews are coming back, at least not in Moscow.

"It's more about freedom of choice, the exodus from an inner Egypt," he says.

For Chlenov, the current situation of Jews in Russia is comparable with a different part of the story of the Exodus: the 40 years of wandering in the desert.

"Many people have a feeling that we're still the generation of slaves that keeps wandering. It takes time." □