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82nd Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Siddur fetches nearly \$1 million

An anonymous telephone bidder paid \$937,500 for a 16th-century Jewish prayer book during an auction at Christie's in New York.

At Wednesday's sale, the book, part of a 148-item collection from the London Beit Din, sold well above the auction house's pre-sale estimate of between \$300,000 and \$500,000.

Judges debate Nazi's sentence

Two British judges are disputing the length of time a convicted war criminal should spend in jail.

Anthony Sawoniuk, 78, was sentenced to life last April after he was found guilty of having killed Jews as a member of a pro-Nazi local police force that was created in Belarus after the German invasion of the country in 1941.

One judge wants Sawoniuk to spend the rest of his life in jail, while another is arguing that he should be allowed at least some hope of release.

Envoy slams Lithuanian justice

Lithuania's poor record of prosecuting suspected Nazi war criminals proves that the country has turned into a haven for Nazi collaborators, Israel's ambassador to Lithuania said in a speech this week.

His comments prompted some Lithuanian politicians to call for his removal. [Page 3]

Agency backs strategic plan

The Jewish Agency for Israel approved in principle a strategic plan to broaden its work in Jewish identity, Jewish unity and Israel-Diaspora relations, in addition to its traditional role of being responsible for immigration and absorption in Israel.

On Wednesday, the agency's 300-member delegate assembly also formally installed new officers during its closing session.

Sallai Meridor officially took over the chairmanship from newly elected legislator Avraham Burg, and Alex Grass of Harrisburg, Pa., succeeded Charles "Corky" Goodman of Chicago as chairman of the agency's Board of Governors.

Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak, who was scheduled to speak at the agency's closing session, declined to appear because he is not making public speeches until he forms his governing coalition and officially takes office.

Court rules rabbis cannot be sued for speaking out on religious issues

By Julie Wiener

NEW YORK (JTA) — In a case with potentially important implications for the American rabbinate, a U.S. District Court in New Jersey has ruled that rabbis who speak out publicly on religious matters cannot be sued in civil court.

The June 14 ruling — which concerns a man criticized by rabbis for denying his wife a Jewish divorce and then remarrying — will likely encourage rabbis to freely broadcast their religious judgments on divorce and other matters.

But it also highlights how difficult it can be to persuade intransigent men to grant gets, or Jewish divorces, to their estranged wives.

Jews who live according to halachah, or Jewish law, require a get to dissolve their marriages, but only a man can give a get.

Women denied gets are forbidden from remarrying or even dating, and are called agunot, or "chained women." In the case heard by the New Jersey court, Seymour Klagsbrun and Judith Oshry vs. Va'ad Harabonim of Greater Monsey et al., the plaintiffs accused the Va'ad, or Council of Orthodox Rabbis, of the suburban New York town of defaming them in 1996.

At that time, the Va'ad had circulated a flyer in the Orthodox community urging people to shun Klagsbrun for long denying a get to his first wife, Shulamith Klagsbrun, and for failing — when asked — to show the Va'ad the rabbinic permission he claimed to have received that would enable him to remarry.

The plaintiffs alleged that the flyer contained false and defamatory statements.

But U.S. District Judge Harold Ackerman dismissed the case, saying that because of the Establishment Clause of the Constitution separating church and state, a civil court cannot decide whether statements based on religious interpretation are true or false.

"Inquiry into the methodology of how religious organizations arrive at their conclusions concerning questions of religious doctrine are, like the conclusions themselves, beyond the ken of civil courts," wrote Ackerman.

Klagsbrun, who acted as his own attorney, currently lives in New Jersey and was not available for comment. Shulamith Klagsbrun also was not available for comment.

Although Seymour Klagsbrun appears to have lost the battle, he may very well have won the war. He continues to withhold the get, and rabbis involved in the case say there is nothing more they can do to pressure him, especially since he no longer lives in Monsey.

"The only thing rabbis have is moral right," said Rabbi Alfred Cohen, a member of Monsey's Va'ad and one of the defendants in the case. "There's nothing else we can do. We don't go around beating up people. In this case we exerted moral right, and we are proud of that."

Cohen said he was pleased with the ruling and believed it "will give us a certain freedom that we desperately need."

He noted that the ruling will also set a precedent in disputes over kashrut standards, enabling rabbis to publicly decry institutions that fall short of dietary law standards without fear of civil lawsuits.

The American Jewish Congress defended the rabbis in the case, and Marc Stern, the attorney who handled the case, said it would gladly defend other rabbis in similar lawsuits. Due to a rash of litigation in recent years, many Orthodox rabbis who lack funds for legal fees have been reluctant to publicize seruvim, or religious contempt citations. Such citations — which effectively excommunicate people from the Orthodox

MIDEAST FOCUS

Syria seeks peacekeepers

An envoy of Syrian President Hafez Assad asked Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien this week to consider sending additional peacekeeping troops to the Golan Heights should Israel and Syria reach an agreement about the disputed territory.

Chretien indicated that he would not contemplate sending in more troops at least until Israel and Syria resume peace talks.

Canada has 187 troops stationed in the Golan as part of a U.N. peacekeeping team stationed there since the end of the 1973 Yom Kippur War.

Mubarak, Arafat meet on peace

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak met with Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat to coordinate their positions on the peace process. Thursday's meeting came two days before Mubarak was to fly to the United States. He is expected to confer with President Clinton next Thursday.

Wrecks found near Israeli coast

Undersea explorers found off the coast of Israel what they described Wednesday as the oldest known deep-water wrecks.

The explorers, who found a pair of Phoenician cargo ships they said were more than 2,500 years old, used the same underwater tracking equipment that was used to locate the Titanic.

Group sets up 'Messiah-cam'

An evangelical Christian group is setting up a camera trained on the eastern gate of Jerusalem's Old City to capture what it hopes will be the Christian Messiah's entrance into the city.

The "Messiah-cam" established by Daystar International Ministry, which has offices in the United States and England, hopes to broadcast the Second Coming of Jesus at the beginning of the next millennium over its Web site.



Daily News Bulletin

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community — are often the only weapon available against men who deny their wives gets, said Rivka Haut, a Brooklyn-based advocate for agunot.

"Just recently I was able to help a woman who was an agunah for seven years, largely as a result of the threat to make the seruv public," said Haut.

"Until then, [the estranged husband] had been able to harass her by withholding a get, and nothing was there to make him uncomfortable. The threat led to a get within two weeks."

Haut said she was pleased by the ruling in the Klagsbrun case, noting that "this ruling strengthens the hands of those who have to resort to using a seruv, and it's important to have that right reaffirmed."

However, she expressed skepticism that it would help Shulamith Klagsbrun. "He's held out so long he probably won't give in now," said Haut.

The Klagsbruns have been estranged since 1984, shortly after Seymour Klagsbrun allegedly threatened — in front of their children — to kill his wife. Despite a Beit Din, or religious court, ruling ordering him to grant a get, he has repeatedly refused.

In 1997, Klagsbrun and his new wife, Judith Oshry, traveled to Israel, where rabbinical courts informed of the case attempted to detain him until he would grant the get. However, the U.S. Department of State interceded on his behalf, enabling him to leave the country.

No statistics are available on agunot, but their defenders say the problem is widespread in the Orthodox community.

While few cases are as extreme as the Klagsbruns', it is not uncommon for men to withhold a get in order to extort money from their estranged wives or simply out of spite, said Haut.

A volunteer with the Brooklyn-based Get Organization, Haut estimated she has been involved in the cases of hundreds of women in the past 15 to 20 years.

Organizations on behalf of agunot have proliferated in recent years — and a conference on the topic was held this week at Israel's Bar-Ilan University — but such organizations are run largely by volunteers and on shoestring budgets.

And rabbis are often slow to intercede on behalf of agunot — whether from fear of lawsuits or other reasons, Haut said.

"A few rabbis are very helpful quietly behind the scenes, but most are very silent and prefer ignoring this because it's not pleasant and shows Judaism at its worst," Haut said. "Until about 10 years ago rabbis were denying this was a problem at all," she said, adding that "there's a stigma attached in the Orthodox world to divorce in general and there's a hidden sense of, 'What is wrong with that woman? Why couldn't she hold that marriage together?'"

However, the AJCongress' Stern said rabbis are becoming more vocal on behalf of agunot, and that the Klagsbrun ruling will accelerate this trend. □

Barak, Assad trade compliments

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Published comments by the leaders of Israel and Syria are giving political observers new evidence that peace negotiations between the two countries are poised to resume.

Syrian President Hafez Assad and Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak made favorable comments about each other in separate interviews published in the London-based, Arab-language newspaper Al Hayat.

In his first public comments on Israel's new leadership, Assad described Barak as "strong and honest."

"As the election results show, he obviously has wide support, and it is clear that he wants to achieve peace with Syria," Assad added in the interview.

For his part, Barak said of Assad, "His legacy is a strong, independent, self-confident Syria." Using a term often used by Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat to describe the Oslo accords, Barak added that he was truly excited to find out if there was a possibility for a "peace of the brave" with Syria.

The comments, which were seen as signals that the two are ready to revive peace talks, came after Assad's biographer, journalist Patrick Seale, shuttled between Damascus and Tel Aviv to get the interviews. □

JEWISH WORLD

Camp commander: No one hurt

A former Croatian concentration camp commander on trial for war crimes said the Nazi puppet regime he served had harmed no one.

Dinko Sakic's comments Thursday, made at the start of his defense, came despite reports that up to 85,000 Jews, Serbs and Gypsies may have perished in the Jasenovac camp while he headed it in 1944.

Sakic faces a possible 20-year jail term.

Writer cleared by French court

A French court ruled Wednesday in favor of an American writer who had suggested that a French Jewish art dealer collaborated with the Nazis.

A panel of three judges said that Hector Feliciano, accused of slandering the late Georges Wildenstein in his 1997 book "The Lost Museum," had documents showing the art dealer "had direct and indirect relations with German authorities during the Occupation."

KKK leader fined

A jury in Virginia convicted a Ku Klux Klan leader of cross-burning on Wednesday and fined him \$2,500. Barry Black, a KKK imperial wizard, had faced up to five years in prison for violating a state law against burning a cross to intimidate any person or group of people.

His black lawyer, David Baugh of the American Civil Liberties Union, had claimed that his client was exercising his right to free speech.

Grand jury indicts rabbi

A New York grand jury on Tuesday indicted a rabbi on charges that he made death threats against a woman scheduled to testify that her father had raped her as a child. Bernard Freilich, of Borough Park, Brooklyn, is scheduled to be arraigned in two weeks on felony charges of witness tampering, witness intimidation and harassment.

A lawyer for Freilich, who has been suspended from his job as special assistant and spiritual adviser to the New York state police, said he would plead innocent to the charges. The woman's father has been charged with first-degree rape, witness-tampering and criminal contempt.

Historian gets 'genius grant'

A historian specializing in the role ordinary Germans played in the Holocaust received one of 32 "genius grants" announced Tuesday by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

Saul Friedlander, who published this year "Nazi Germany and the Jews, Volume One: Years of Persecution, 1933-1939," received \$375,000, spread over five years, from the foundation.

U.S. Holocaust survivors scheduled to receive German reparation funds

By Peter Ephross

NEW YORK (JTA)—Most of the Americans slated to receive money because they were imprisoned in Nazi camps should receive their shares of about \$18.5 million from Germany by the end of the summer, according to a source familiar with the process.

As a result of an agreement between the United States and Germany that is part of the Holocaust Claims Program, the U.S. Treasury, with funds received from Germany, will make one-time payments ranging from \$30,000 to \$250,000 to about 235 survivors.

The agreement, reached in January, came in the wake of a 1995 settlement in which Hugo Princz and 10 other American survivors shared some \$2.1 million from the German government.

When the United States declared war against Germany, Princz and seven members of his family, all American citizens living in Slovakia, were turned over to the Nazis.

Princz, who spent three years in Auschwitz, was the only member of his immediate family to survive the war. He then waged a 40-year campaign to earn restitution from Germany that ended in the 1995 settlement.

The German government has paid more than \$54 billion in reparations to survivors from Europe, but no individuals who were U.S. citizens at the time of the war had been compensated.

As a result of the Princz decision, the U.S. government established the Holocaust Claims Program, which allowed American citizens who suffered at the hands of the Nazis to apply for restitution.

In 1997, the U.S. Justice Department's Foreign Claims Settlement Commission, which screened applicants for the program, ruled that only those Americans who suffered in a concentration camp or sub-camp, or were made to participate in a forced labor march, were eligible for the program. □

Israeli ambassador calls Lithuania a Nazi haven, angering lawmakers

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA)—Once again, Israel's ambassador to Lithuania has managed to raise the hackles of many of that Baltic nation's politicians.

And once again, he touched on the same hot-button accusation: that Lithuania's poor record of prosecuting suspected Nazi war criminals proves that the country has turned into a haven for Nazi collaborators.

Oded Ben Hur, who is based in the Latvian capital of Riga and serves as Israel's envoy to the three Baltic nations, said Lithuania — as well as Latvia and Estonia — would find it difficult to integrate into the new Europe if they fail to cope with their wartime past — and acknowledge their roles in the Holocaust. Ben Hur's comments, made this week at a dinner organized by the Lithuanian Jewish community for a visiting U.S. Jewish delegation, prompted some Lithuanian politicians to call for his removal.

The vice chairman of the Lithuanian Parliament, Romualdas Ozolas, later told reporters that Ben Hur was attempting "to pit Jews and Lithuanians against each other and to discredit the Lithuanian state."

The lawmaker also urged Lithuanian Foreign Minister Algirdas Saudargas to ask the Israeli authorities whether they could find a "more suitable" candidate for the position.

The Lithuanian Foreign Ministry and President's Office declined to comment.

During the Nazi occupation of Lithuania from 1941-1944, approximately 94 percent of Lithuania's prewar Jewish community of 240,000 died in the Holocaust.

Historians say the scale of the tragedy could have been smaller had ordinary Lithuanians not helped with the killings.

Since Lithuania regained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, it has not prosecuted any of the alleged Nazi collaborators living there. □

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD**New center for children provides refuge in Moscow***By Lev Krichevsky*

MOSCOW (JTA) — Small and painfully thin, Dima looks younger than his 6 years.

In the past few years, Dima's mother abandoned his family; his father, suffering from health and financial problems, could not take proper care of him.

This month, Dima joined 27 other Jewish boys and girls between the ages of 2 and 15 who are being raised at the Passin-Waxman Center, a new Jewish children's home in the center of Moscow.

The home, which held its dedication ceremony last week, was established with a \$250,000 grant from Anita Waxman, a successful Broadway producer.

Believed to be the first such center to open in Russia — which was the largest republic in the former Soviet Union — in 65 years, the home is also supported by the United Jewish Israel Appeal of Great Britain and a number of local donors.

All but four of the children here have a living parent who cannot care for them because of chronic social, financial and health problems — including alcoholism.

While most of the children hail from Moscow, several have been brought here from Russia's troubled North Caucasus region near the breakaway republic of Chechnya, and three come from families affected by the 1986 nuclear accident in Chernobyl, Ukraine.

"For about a year, we've been looking for Jewish kids in trouble," says Rafiel Ben-Yosef, the sturdy, bearded man with smiling face who runs the home.

He and his wife, Svetlana, live at the center and call themselves the children's parents.

We thought it would be difficult to find kids for a Jewish children's home, Svetlana says.

"It turned out to be easy, especially now, during the economic crisis," she adds, referring to the financial chaos that has gripped Russia since last August.

As poverty has spread, family problems have multiplied and Russia's social support networks have deteriorated.

Russia is facing its worst child care disaster since World War II, when hundreds of thousands of children were left without parental care.

The situation of Jewish children is usually slightly better, but the economic turmoil has left its scars on many Jewish families as well.

"When a 'Yiddishe mama' turns her kid over" to a home, then "something in the family went terribly wrong," Rafiel Ben-Yosef says.

Without the center, most of the children would have probably never ended up in an institution because of the appalling conditions of Russian state-run homes for children, where kids are exposed to shocking levels of cruelty and neglect.

They would have struggled for survival on the streets, in alcoholic homes or they would have lived with elderly relatives barely able to support themselves.

In addition to serving the children's social, educational and

psychological needs, the center focuses on creating a Jewish environment for them.

The children — who like most Russian Jews have not had a Jewish upbringing — eat kosher meals, celebrate Shabbat and attend services at the Moscow Choral Synagogue, which is within walking distance from the home. The boys wear white silk yarmulkas.

They will spend the summer at a camp outside the city.

Starting this fall, the children will attend classes at one of the Moscow Jewish day schools.

The center is temporarily housed in a six-bedroom apartment in a duplex in downtown Moscow.

Next year, the center will move from this apartment, which is rented from a private owner, to a building of its own that the city of Moscow will provide.

The seed for the center was planted two years ago, when Waxman, the mother of three adult children and two stepdaughters, came to Russia to adopt a 2-year-old boy.

During the adoption process, Waxman, who had earlier established a family foundation for needy children around the world, met with Moscow's chief rabbi, Pinchas Goldschmidt.

"We decided to start a home specifically for Jewish kids — not knowing exactly what we were talking about," Waxman said.

Now dozens of children are already on a waiting list, including several from state orphanages.

"The new building will also have space for infants which will give more opportunities for adoption," Waxman says.

Goldschmidt believes the center will be an important part of the Jewish revival taking place in Russia.

"These kids will be part of a community that can be proud of them, a community that will take care of both adoptable and unadoptable children."

About 200 children live at three Jewish homes that were opened in Ukraine during the past three years.

But Goldschmidt says the demand for such institutions in Russia should be even higher because the Russian Jewish community is larger than Ukraine's.

"Ultimately, the idea is to have a home to be an alternative to abortions," says Goldschmidt, referring to the high rate of abortions in Russia.

According to official statistics, Russian women have between three and eight abortions in their lifetimes.

As one of the guests at last week's dedication looked at the children playing, he reminisced about his experience at a Jewish orphanage.

Anatoly Dun was one of dozens of children that came through the Moscow Jewish orphanage, which existed between 1923 and 1933 — until it was closed by Stalin.

"I was happy there," Dun, 84, says.

"I hope these kids have the same memories about their home when they grow up."

Waxman, who has visited dozens of orphanages around the world, says they all have one thing in common.

"Be it in China, or in India or here — there is always deadness in children's eyes," she says.

The home she helped to establish in Moscow may be the happy exception to that rule.

"Can I stay here forever?" 6-year-old Kristina asks in a very low voice. "People here are so kind, not like in my old home." □