



Daily News Bulletin

Vol. 77, No. 224

Wednesday, December 1, 1999

82nd Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Court asked to avoid religion

In a vote spearheaded by fervently Orthodox legislators, Israel's Knesset passed a resolution calling on the High Court of Justice to refrain from ruling on matters affecting religion. [Page 4]

Bradley weighs in on Jerusalem

Democratic presidential candidate Bill Bradley said that while he has "always supported Jerusalem as the capital of Israel," the issue "ought to be worked out among the negotiating parties themselves." His comments were part of a foreign-policy address he delivered Monday.

When he was a senator from New Jersey, Bradley was an original co-sponsor of legislation passed in 1995 directing the United States to move its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

Burg, Chinese leader meet

Israel's Knesset speaker met with the chairman of China's National People's Congress. The meeting between Avraham Burg and Li Peng had been postponed because of China's anger over an earlier meeting Burg had with the Dalai Lama. [Page 4]

Jews take part in WTO protests

Members of the Jewish Renewal community are organizing morning prayer services in Seattle to protest the World Trade Organization gathering taking place there. The Jewish Renewal organizers, along with protesters from many environmental advocacy groups, are there to oppose trade policies that they feel threaten the earth's ecology.

Meanwhile, a coalition of 27 national Jewish organizations urged the U.S. government to support trade provisions that protect the environment.

State Dept. to report on attacks

The State Department will for the first time be required to provide regular reports to Congress concerning the U.S. investigations into the murders of 12 Americans who have been killed in Palestinian terrorist attacks since 1993.

The provisions were included in the State Department reauthorization bill, which was wrapped into the \$385 billion budget bill signed Monday by President Clinton. The Zionist Organization of America lobbied for the provision.

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

Kosovo's Jews battle for survival along with ethnic Albanian neighbors

By Michael J. Jordan

PRIZREN, Yugoslavia (JTA) — "Ah, the ironies of life," says Votim Demiri. His mother escaped from the train that carried her family to death at Bergen-Belsen. Later, she became renowned for fighting with the Yugoslav partisans against the Nazis.

Fast forward to this spring.

A Serb offensive in Kosovo forced Demiri, the president of Prizren's Jews, and close to 1 million Albanian refugees to flee their homes. Demiri, his wife and three children returned and hid until three months of NATO airstrikes persuaded Serb forces to withdraw. So, today in Prizren, whose troops are keeping the peace? The Germans.

"I wonder what my mother would say if she were here to see it," says Demiri, 52. His mother died in 1994.

The fact is, German troops are among the most highly respected in postwar Kosovo, further enhancing a reputation they earned in Macedonia by building what relief workers called the "Club Med" of Albanian refugee camps.

One of the primary tasks for Germans today, however, is to protect their erstwhile enemies, the Serbs. Serbs and other non-Albanian minorities have been targets of reprisals by the returning Albanian refugees.

The Albanian-speaking Jews of Prizren, though, have nothing to fear from the refugees. They are so assimilated, the Serbs of Kosovo view them as Albanians.

These Jews share the fate of their oppressed Albanian neighbors — a situation that contrasts starkly with the 40 Serb-speaking Jews in Pristina, Kosovo's capital.

When Serbian nationalist Slobodan Milosevic rose to power in Yugoslavia in 1989, among his first steps was to revoke the autonomy of Kosovo, Yugoslavia's southern province. An apartheid-like system was installed, whereby the Serbian minority — some 10 percent of Kosovo's population — assumed the dominant position in public life. The Serbian-speaking Jews here, also deeply assimilated, were among the new elite.

So they, too, have felt the wrath of the returning refugees.

It's not that these Jews were particularly active or visible in the regime; but Albanians view every Serb-speaker as having been complicit.

Indeed, most Jews seem to have been infected by anti-Albanian prejudice and propaganda. During the forced removal of ethnic Albanians, it was rare to hear a Serb — or a Serbian Jew — express sympathy or outrage on their behalf.

Anywhere from 5,000 to 10,000 Albanians were killed; 3,000 to 7,000 are still reported missing.

Like many Serbs, Pristina's Jews either left in advance of the returning Albanians or were expelled from their homes. Their community in Kosovo is no more, with most of them now in Belgrade, the Yugoslav capital. They are trying to get to either Israel or to the United States.

Meanwhile, the Prizren Jews are battling for survival. Kosovo, legally still a part of Yugoslavia, is wracked with violent crime, lawlessness and revenge killings, plagued with daily power and water outages, and saddled with 70 percent unemployment. A tour around the province reveals a landscape scarred with mass graves and land mines, and littered with burned-out homes and businesses.

Kosovo is now a U.N. protectorate, with its massive administration and hundreds of relief agencies on the ground responsible for rebuilding the province. But if this exercise in colony-building founders, the Prizren Jews may use their connections abroad

MIDEAST FOCUS

Barak, Arafat may meet

Israel's prime minister and the Palestinian Authority president may meet to try to resolve a dispute over an Israeli withdrawal from more of the West Bank. Israel Radio quoted political sources as saying that while no meeting has been set, it could take place if Yasser Arafat is interested. Ehud Barak and Arafat failed to solve the problem in a meeting on the eve of the scheduled pullback two weeks ago.

Meanwhile, the U.S. State Department said it hopes the Israeli-Palestinian deadlock over the Israeli withdrawal will be settled before Secretary of State Madeleine Albright arrives in the region Sunday.

Arab equality bill may get vote

The speaker of Israel's Parliament, as well as coalition and opposition leaders, are calling for allowing a controversial bill seeking "equality for the Arab population" to be brought to a vote.

Knesset legal advisers have recommended that a parliamentary group reject the bill on the grounds that it undermines the existence of the State of Israel as the state of the Jewish people.

Settlers removed from outpost

Israeli security forces arrested 19 young settlers who tried to establish a hilltop outpost near the West Bank settlement of Nokdim.

The settlers were arrested Tuesday because they disobeyed army orders to leave the hilltop near Bethlehem, according to a police spokeswoman.

Yeltsin may visit West Bank

Russian President Boris Yeltsin may travel to the West Bank in January to mark the Eastern Orthodox celebration of Christmas, according to Yasser Arafat. The Palestinian Authority president made the comment during a visit to Moscow after speaking by phone with Yeltsin, who canceled a planned meeting with Arafat because of illness.

to head for greener pastures. One family of four has already emigrated to Israel, aided by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, and a second family is seriously considering it, Demiri says.

Prizren, a city of roughly 150,000, is a historic trade center in the Balkans. It is also Kosovo's most charming city, with its centuries-old stone bridges, mosques and wooden homes framed by a range of densely forested mountains.

Jews are said to have lived here for centuries. There is no synagogue in town, though a Star of David adorns the minaret of one of the town's old stone mosques.

"I have no idea where it comes from," concedes Demiri.

However, deep roots may not be enough to keep the Prizren Jews here. They also need jobs. Today, the community is basically comprised of two large, extended families. Mixed marriages are common: Demiri's father, for example, is Albanian, and his wife is "something between Albanian and Turkish."

Yet Demiri's Jewish identity is sufficiently strong that his 22-year-old son would like to visit Israel to learn Hebrew. And concern for the welfare of others during the crisis has bound the community even more tightly together.

Most Jews and their Albanian neighbors today eke out a living, accepting food staples like flour and cooking oil from humanitarian groups.

As a result of the crisis, however, living is cheap: the collapse of public services means that no one pays taxes, or for gas, electricity and water.

Only one-quarter of the community's 27 adults has found work, ranging from shop clerk to hospital worker. But their average salary is \$78 per month.

With much of Kosovo's industry and business destroyed or dormant, the black market is thriving. But Demiri says no one in his community is drawn to the hustle of the streets.

"We don't have a talent for this kind of work," he says with a smile. "It's impossible for me to go to Turkey, fill up bags with cheap clothes, then come back here and sell them."

Actually, admits Demiri, his family is getting along fine: he's been reinstated as the director of a local textile factory, a job he lost when Milosevic and his lieutenants purged all "Albanians" from leadership positions in 1989 and 90.

A factory that once boasted 2,600 workers now has only 500 — all of them unpaid for now. What his people need, Demiri says, are not handouts, but machines to start up small businesses, like a hair salon. But he is one of the few optimists.

"We don't want to live from humanitarian aid forever; people in Kosovo know how to work hard to make a living," he says.

"But I want to make it clear: we'll need plenty of time. No system in the world could have anticipated or handled this type of situation." □

Appeal goes out in Germany after mason who helped Jews is victimized

By Toby Axelrod

BERLIN (JTA) — Neo-Nazi vandals have apparently victimized the stonemason who recently repaired Berlin's vandalized Jewish cemetery for free.

After receiving telephone death threats, 150 gravestones in the mason's eastern Berlin warehouse were destroyed. A public appeal is trying to help compensate him for his loss of nearly \$40,000.

In October the stonemason, who has asked that his name not be used, offered to repair the damage to 103 Jewish gravestones that had been vandalized on Oct. 3, the anniversary of Germany's reunification.

Reportedly, he has pitched in during similar situations over the years.

The Jewish community held a dinner in honor of the stonemason Nov. 24 after the repair of the stones in Berlin's Weissensee Jewish Cemetery was finished.

The mason kept quiet about the attack out of fear, said Julia Plessing, manager of the Amadeus Antonio Foundation: Initiatives for Society and Democratic Culture, which has established a bank account for donations. Information about making a donation is available by e-mailing anettakahane@t-online.de □



Daily News Bulletin

Shoshana S. Cardin, President

Mark J. Joffe, Executive Editor and Publisher

Lisa Hostein, Editor

Howard Lovy, Managing Editor

Lenore A. Silverstein, Business Manager

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.
© JTA Reproduction only by previous arrangement.

JEWISH WORLD

Swiss fund OKs new payments

A Swiss fund for needy Holocaust survivors approved a new round of payments totaling some \$1.25 million. The money will go to about 1,600 people, including Jewish survivors in Holland and Sweden.

There is now some \$13 million remaining in the Holocaust Memorial Fund, which was established in 1997 by Switzerland's three largest banks amid allegations that the Swiss banks were hoarding the wealth of Holocaust victims.

According to the Reuters news agency, the fund, which originally totaled some \$190 million, will now lower its age limit and allow people born after 1921 to apply for payments.

Farrakhan, anti-Zionists meet

Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan and leaders of a religious anti-Zionist group condemned the "Zionist-controlled media" and the "Zionist lobby," according to the Final Call, the Nation of Islam's newspaper.

The comments came at the second meeting this year between Farrakhan and leaders of the Neturei Karta. Rabbi Moshe Beck, who headed the Neturei Karta delegation, offered a blessing to Farrakhan generally reserved for nobility and royalty, according to the newspaper.

Agudah leader calls for calm

The religious leader of the largest fervently Orthodox organization in the United States called for an end to interpersonal conflict among Jews.

But Rabbi Yaakov Perlow, the religious head of Agudath Israel of America, also told attendees at the group's 77th national convention in New Jersey over the Thanksgiving holiday weekend, not to "overlook truth in the pursuit of peace."

Delivery service changes stance

The American Jewish Congress praised a package delivery service's decision to reverse itself and begin making deliveries to Jewish settlements in the West Bank.

The AJCongress had previously called on Airborne Express to end the "discriminatory practice" of not serving the settlements while at the same time making deliveries to Palestinian communities in the same area.

Gymnast named to hall of fame

An inspirational gymnastics star of the 1996 U.S. Olympic team was among eight people elected to the International Jewish Sports Hall of Fame. In addition to Kerri Strug, the inductees for the year 2000 include Lello Efrati, an Italian boxer killed at Auschwitz.

Italian appeals court to decide fate of girls separated from Orthodox mother

By Ruth E. Gruber

ROME (JTA) — A controversial ruling that separated two Israeli girls from their fervently Orthodox mother and placed them into the custody of their non-observant father goes before an appeals court in Genoa this week.

The case has triggered outrage in the Jewish world because of what is being characterized as the anti-religious bias of the court that made the original custody ruling.

"We strongly suspect that the custody order was born from an ideological approach, intolerant and repulsive as regards Jews in general, not only those who are Orthodox," said Rome Chief Rabbi Elio Toaff, who has asked to address the appeals court where the hearing was scheduled to open on Thursday.

The lower court dismissed the mother's claim to her daughters because, it said, she belonged to a "religious cult."

Instead, it ordered the father to wean the children from Orthodoxy and make sure that they "gradually re-enter alternative cultural and behavioral models."

Complicating matters are unconfirmed reports that the father has converted to Roman Catholicism and is attempting to raise the girls as Catholic.

The girls, now 14 and 10, are the daughters of Moshe Dulberg and his former wife, Tali Pikan, both Israelis who lived in Genoa.

The couple were divorced in 1991, and custody was awarded to the mother.

She eventually joined a Chasidic group and became Orthodox. Her ex-husband tried to regain custody of the children because she had embraced Orthodoxy.

Spiriting the girls out of Italy, she returned to Israel, where she remarried a fervently Orthodox, or haredi, rabbi. The girls lived with their mother in Israel for eight years until the Israeli Supreme Court ordered them returned to Italy in April for a final custody decision. The Italian court placed them with their father.

During the hearing in August, the girls testified that they wanted to remain with their mother. Psychologists called to testify on the father's behalf said this intense attachment was proof that Orthodox Judaism was a cult. The custody ruling limited the mother's contact with the girls, forbidding her even to speak to them in Hebrew.

She is permitted to speak on the phone to each daughter for no more than 10 minutes twice a week, only in Italian, and to see the children on a very limited basis. The father may tape the conversations.

Agudath Israel, the Orthodox Union and other international groups have issued protests against the ruling. In September, the Conference of European Rabbis issued a strongly worded statement expressing "complete rejection" of the court's decision and its stigmatization of Orthodox Judaism as a religious cult.

"This assertion is libelous and utterly untenable and will be acknowledged as such by religious authorities throughout the world," it said. The injustice of placing these children into an impossible situation including the restricted manner in which they are allowed to communicate with their mother is a total denial of their human rights as well as of their Jewish tradition."

In recent letters to top Italian officials, the Agudath Israel World Organization said, "The eyes of the Jewish world are upon your country and its judicial system."

"We urge you to do everything within your power to reverse the terrible course that this case has taken thus far." □

Day school office to open in New York

NEW YORK (JTA) — New York City will soon be home to the first regional office of the National Jewish Day School Scholarship Committee, according to the group's chairman.

Its director, who has not yet been named, will work with the roughly 275 Jewish day schools and yeshivas in New York to raise money for endowments in the hope of subsidizing tuition for all students seeking a day school education, George Hanus said.

He also hopes to open offices in Miami, Los Angeles, Baltimore and Texas. □

Move asking court not to rule on religion roils some lawmakers

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A non-binding resolution on religious pluralism has touched a raw nerve in the Knesset.

Outraged legislators are vowing to reverse the motion, which passed 14-10 during a thinly attended session, calling on the High Court of Justice to refrain from ruling on matters affecting religion.

On one side of the debate are legislators who stoutly defend the court as one of the foundations on which Israeli democracy is based.

On the other are legislators from religious parties who feel threatened by a court that has issued a series of rulings eroding the status quo, which gives the Orthodox Chief Rabbinate control over Jewish life-cycle events, and granting more recognition to Judaism's liberal streams.

Last February, haredi, or fervently Orthodox, leaders declared the judiciary "enemies" of the Jewish people after the High Court issued an order to allow Conservative and Reform representatives to serve on local religious councils.

The haredi leaders also were stung by a court ruling that canceled a decades-old arrangement under which yeshiva students are entitled to army draft exemptions and a separate decision allowing a kibbutz to maintain business operations on the Sabbath.

In February, some 250,000 fervently Orthodox Jews heeded the calls of their rabbis to take part in a mass prayer vigil to seek an end to what organizers termed the "anti-religious" rulings of the High Court.

In a counterdemonstration about a mile away, some 50,000 people — including university students and youth group members — filled a public park to make their stand known.

Those same divisions were apparent in the Knesset this week.

Knesset member Zahava Gal-On, a member of the secular Meretz Party, received permission from Burg to raise the matter on the Knesset floor Tuesday — prior to a new debate on the resolution next week.

"I think it's a miserable and stupid decision, and hope the High Court will not pay attention to it," Gal-On told Israel Radio. She acknowledged that members of her own party had failed to show up to vote against the motion.

"I admit, it was a foul-up on our part. Some of our members were not in the building at the time, everyone was busy with different things. But I think it is not too late to change this awful decision that was made," she added.

Coalition whip Ophir Pines said the motion displayed contempt toward both the court and parliament.

But Pines backed a second motion that was also passed Monday, which called on the High Court to show sensitivity to the various sectors of Israeli society on issues crucial to them.

On the other side of the divide, Religious Affairs Minister Yitzhak Cohen, a member of the fervently Orthodox Shas Party, expressed satisfaction with passage of the first resolution and warned against taking steps to cancel it.

"If the Knesset starts to function based on the caprice of one party or another, the whole thing could begin to be dangerous and be seen as the beginning of the unraveling of the Israeli parliament," he said. □

Israeli-Chinese relations survive uproar over Dalai Lama meeting

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Ties between Israel and China emerged intact this week after controversy over a meeting the Knesset speaker had with the Dalai Lama.

Despite protests from China over Speaker Avraham Burg's meeting with the exiled Tibetan religious leader, Burg met Monday with the chairman of China's National People's Congress.

The meeting between Burg and Li Peng was initially scheduled for last week, but had been postponed because of China's anger over an earlier meeting between Burg and the Dalai Lama.

China had warned that meeting could harm relations with Israel.

After Burg met Nov. 24 with the Dalai Lama, Li canceled a dinner with the speaker planned for the following day.

As leader of the Chinese Parliament, Li is considered China's second most powerful figure.

He is the highest-ranking official ever to visit Israel and the Palestinian self-rule areas.

"The Dalai Lama is not simply a religious figure," Li was quoted as saying last week. "He is a separatist.

"That is why China rejects political activities carried [out] in other countries against China."

The Dalai Lama went into exile in 1959, nine years after China occupied Tibet.

Since then, the religious leader has spearheaded a campaign for Tibetan autonomy. A recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989, he denies Chinese claims that he is a separatist seeking full independence for Tibet.

Along with Beijing, Israel's Foreign Ministry had pressured Burg not to meet with the Dalai Lama. The ministry had feared such a meeting would harm Israel's chances of expanding trade with China. The two countries established diplomatic ties in 1992.

In light of China's objections, no Israeli ministers met with the exiled leader with the exception of Education Minister Yossi Sarid, who hosted the Dalai Lama for what he termed a "private" meeting.

For his part, Burg refused to bow to the pressure from the Foreign Ministry, saying there were more important considerations than commercial ties. Despite the protests from Beijing, when Li met with Burg on Monday he made no mention of Burg's meeting with the Dalai Lama.

During the 90-minute meeting, both lawmakers expressed interest in deepening ties between the two countries.

"It turns out my refusal to accept the dictates of the Foreign Ministry did not hurt our relations with China," Burg was quoted as saying after meeting with Li.

Li held separate talks with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat. Li also visited the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem, the Western Wall and several kibbutzim.

During their meeting Sunday, Barak told Li that Israel is worried about China's transfer of military technology to Iran. Li responded that China "has normal ties to Iran." His meeting with Li came in stark contrast to the almost complete snub the Dalai Lama got from Israeli officials last week. □