



Daily News Bulletin

Vol. 78, No. 1

Tuesday, January 4, 2000

83rd Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

From battlefield to peace table: Israeli, Syrian players meet again

By Michael Shapiro

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Israeli and Syrian negotiators meeting this week in Shepherdstown, W.Va., are being secluded in the small town that sits just across the Potomac River from the Antietam battlefield of the Civil War.

Indeed, one Jewish group cited the bloody battle that became a turning point in the U.S. Civil War as a lesson for the negotiators sequestered in an economy hotel far from home.

Just as 23,000 Americans died at Antietam, Israel and Syria have incurred thousands of casualties as a result of the wars between the two nations, Mark Rosenblum, founder and policy director of Americans for Peace Now, noted in a news release.

Antietam, he said, should remind Israeli and Syrian negotiators that “even though peace may require painful compromises, there is a tremendous price to be paid when diplomacy fails.”

The Israeli and Syrian officials who will be seeking to reach a peace deal know about battlefields: They fought each other in several bloody wars.

During the open-ended talks which began Monday and are expected to last at least a week, former and current military men from both sides will seek to end their 50-year state of war by negotiating a deal that will encompass security arrangements, the normalization of relations, water rights and the extent of an Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights.

The talks are taking place under a tight media blackout.

The Israeli delegation is being led by Prime Minister Ehud Barak, who also serves as the country's defense minister.

Barak, a former elite army commando and chief of staff, fought against the Syrians on the Golan Heights in 1967, when Israel captured the strategic plateau.

In seeking political support for the highest-level talks ever with Syria, Barak has reminded Israelis of his time battling the Syrians.

“I am fully familiar with every valley and every rock in the Golan,” he said during a speech to the Knesset last month before leaving for Washington for the initial round of talks with Syria.

Barak also has experience negotiating with the Syrians.

As chief of staff, Barak negotiated with Syrian officials during previous negotiations, which were cut off in 1996.

It is not clear yet how the talks will proceed. Israel has suggested discussing security and civil affairs first; Syria has said territorial questions should be tackled at the beginning.

The Israeli prime minister, who arrived in the United States late Sunday night, is being accompanied by several other former top generals — Uri Saguy, the former head of military intelligence who was appointed to head the negotiating team; Danny Yatom, a former head of the Mossad and now Barak's chief of staff; Tourism Minister Amnon Lipkin-Shahak, a former chief of staff who negotiated with the Syrians during the previous round of talks; and Maj. Gen. Shlomo Yannai, who has been appointed the senior army representative to the negotiations and will head the team for security arrangements.

Other senior members of the Israeli delegation are Foreign Minister David Levy;

Israeli-Syrian talks begin

White House spokesman Joe Lockhart said Monday evening that President Clinton believed the Israeli-Syrian talks “were off to a good start.”

But the United States is playing down expectations that this round of talks between Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk al-Sharaa would directly lead to an agreement between the two countries. [Page 1]

Putin's rise draws mixed reaction

Jewish observers both in Russia and in the United States gave a mixed reaction to Vladimir Putin's ascent to power as Russian president.

Rabbi Zinovy Kogan, one of the leaders of Reform Judaism in Russia, said Putin has recently spoken very warmly about Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, saying Barak supports “Russia's position over fighting terrorism in Chechnya.”

But Micah Naftalin, national director of the Washington-based Union of Councils for Soviet Jews, said Putin “has risen to power on the back of a racist war which appeals to the worst xenophobic instincts of the Russians,” he said, referring to the Chechen conflict. [Page 4]

Muslim grave defaced

A group of Jews claimed responsibility for vandalizing a grave near Haifa of a Muslim cleric and leader.

Monday's act was apparently committed by a group calling itself Friends of Baruch Goldstein, which threatened to deface other Muslim holy sites.

It came after Israeli authorities last week demolished a memorial plaza near the grave of Goldstein, who massacred 29 Muslim worshippers in a Hebron mosque five years ago.

Kalejs plans to leave Britain

Britain has begun the process of deporting a man accused of participating in the killing of Jews during World War II, according to a government spokesman.

The comment came as Konrad Kalejs was quoted as saying he would leave the country as soon as possible.

Last month Kalejs, who was a member of the Latvian security police during the war, was discovered to be living in a British retirement home.

MIDEAST FOCUS

Israel investigates Weizman

Israel's attorney general is investigating President Ezer Weizman for cash totaling nearly \$500,000 that he received over the course of several years from a French Jewish businessman.

Weizman confirmed last week that he accepted a total of some \$450,000 from Edouard Seroussi between 1988 and 1993, when he served in the Knesset and as a Cabinet minister.

Weizman said he did not inform tax authorities of the gifts because Seroussi was a personal friend and had no business interests in Israel.

Most media reports have said Weizman used the money for the care of his late son Shaul, who was wounded in 1970 and was later killed in a car accident.

Court rejects soldier's appeal

An Israeli court rejected a soldier's appeal against his arrest on charges he participated in the murder of a teen-ager in Canada last month.

Judge Daniella Wexler ruled that Daniel Weiz's appeal was filed too late.

Under an Israeli law passed last year, Weiz could be extradited to Canada for trial, but serve his sentence in Israel.

Bank governor delays resignation

The governor of the Bank of Israel delayed leaving his office until Jan. 9, allowing Prime Minister Ehud Barak more time to name a successor.

Jacob Frenkel has served in the position for nearly nine years.

Twins born in two millennia

An Israeli woman gave birth to twins over the weekend who were born in different millennia.

Dr. Yinon Gilboa, a gynecologist, assisted in the Caesarean section of his wife, Sigal, as she gave birth Friday night to a daughter two minutes before midnight and a son born just after midnight.

Attorney General Elyakim Rubinstein, who participated as a Foreign Ministry lawyer during the Camp David negotiations with Egypt and headed peace negotiations with Jordan; Zvi Stauber, Barak's diplomatic adviser who heads the normalization committee; and Noah Kinarti, former adviser to prime minister Yitzhak Rabin on water issues, who will lead the discussions on water.

While Barak will be in Shepherdstown, his counterpart and adversary who commanded the Syrian forces in 1967 will not be there.

Syrian President Hafez Assad, who was defense minister in 1967 when the Jewish state captured the Golan Heights, has sent Foreign Minister Farouk al-Sharaa in his stead.

Sharaa, who has been foreign minister for the past 15 years and has overseen negotiations with Israel since they began in 1991 at the Madrid peace conference, is seen as Assad's right-hand man.

"I think that it is very clear from the first round of talks that the foreign minister has been designated by President Assad as his negotiator and we believe that the delegations they're sending here can work through the important issues that face them," White House spokesman Joe Lockhart said Monday before the talks started.

However, the Israelis clearly would like to see Assad join the talks.

Levy said on Monday while en route to Washington that Israel would soon seek Assad's personal involvement in the peace talks as a demonstration of "seriousness and commitment."

U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright has said that Assad is "very much a part of these talks, whether he's currently here or not."

While Sharaa has been a diplomat rather than a soldier, he will have a number of military figures surrounding him during the talks, including Yousuf Shakkour, deputy foreign minister and a former army chief of staff and Ibrahim Omar, a former general who is an expert in military geography.

Other key Syrians who are at the Shepherdstown talks include Riad Daoudi, the delegation's legal adviser; Mikhail Wahba, the Syrian ambassador to the United Nations; Mahid Daoud, former director of the Ministry of Water; and Syria's former ambassador to Washington, Walid Mualem, who was intimately involved in the previous round of negotiations.

The top officials are being accompanied by additional experts in the key areas that will be the focus of the talks.

"In these negotiations the devil is in the details, and the detail men will be the men that are going to play a critical role," State Department spokesman James Rubin said Monday during a news briefing in Shepherdstown.

"And we do expect that — during this round, that all of the issues, one way or another, will be discussed in detail."

As the two sides sit down for what are being billed as intensive and open-ended talks, their American hosts are in West Virginia to facilitate the talks.

During the initial round of talks the two sides held last month — the first after a nearly four-year hiatus — the two delegations were never without American officials in the room.

Albright; National Security Adviser Sandy Berger; the assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, Martin Indyk, who is slated to head back to Israel soon as U.S. ambassador; Dennis Ross, the U.S. special Middle East coordinator, and the rest of the American peace process team are staying with their Israeli and Syrian counterparts at the Clarion Hotel and Conference Center.

"The U.S. can be a facilitator, and I'm going to be there the whole time in Shepherdstown," Albright said Sunday on NBC's "Meet the Press."

"The president will be coming in as often as necessary. He will be deeply, deeply involved in this, and we hope to be able to take advantage of this historic opportunity," she said.

Lockhart said President Clinton has cleared his schedule this week so he could focus on the talks.

"The president understands we have an historic opportunity hear to reach a lasting peace between Israel and its neighbors," Lockhart said. "There are differences that are significant and complex." □



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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JEWISH WORLD

Girl who got lung transplant dies

An Israeli girl who received a double lung transplant in November from a man who had read of her plight in his local Jewish paper died Saturday in St. Louis.

Although the transplant was completed successfully, Lisa Ostrovsky, a 10-year-old who suffered from cystic fibrosis, died of multiple postoperative complications, hospital officials said.

Swiss pressed on Nazi accounts

Jewish organizations are calling on Switzerland to publish the names of leftover account holders belonging to Nazi officials. The call comes after a commission headed by former U.S. Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volcker found in a report issued last month that nearly 1,700 accounts had connections to Nazis.

U.S. publishes report on assets

The U.S. Congressional Research Service published a report on Holocaust-era assets. The report, which contains information relating to Swiss bank accounts and other assets from the Holocaust era, is available on the World Wide Web at www.house.gov/international_relations.

The report was written at the request of Rep. Benjamin Gilman (R-N.Y.), chairman of the House International Relations Committee.

Holocaust museum founder dies

Jeshajahu "Shaik" Weinberg, the founding director of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, died of a stroke Saturday in Tel Aviv.

Weinberg, 81, was the founding director of the Museum of the Jewish Diaspora in Tel Aviv and came out of retirement in 1989 to help establish the museum in Washington.

Birthright produces engagement

A program that is providing first-time trips for Jewish adults to Israel produced its first engagement.

Jason Trager proposed to Stacy Gastwirth by the shores of the Dead Sea on New Year's Eve while they were on a weeklong Hillel Israel 2000 tour, underwritten by Birthright Israel.

"I never expected to have the opportunity to share such a special moment in such a special place," Trager said.

Seinfeld's wife received get

Jerry Seinfeld's bride received a Jewish divorce from her ex-husband before she married the comedian and television star. Seinfeld married Jessica Sklar in a Jewish ceremony Dec. 25.

Libel suit against U.S. historian puts the Holocaust itself on trial

By Douglas Davis

LONDON (JTA) — The Holocaust is scheduled to go on trial in a courtroom here next week.

A leading Holocaust denier, David Irving, is suing a U.S. historian, Deborah Lipstadt, and her publisher for libel.

The case is expected to produce the most detailed judicial inspection of the Holocaust since the trial of Nazi official Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961.

The alleged libel appears in Lipstadt's work, "Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory," published by Penguin Books in 1994.

The trial, which is scheduled to last three months, is set to begin Jan. 11.

Irving, a British citizen who has acquired an international following, claims that Lipstadt attacked him personally and professionally, depicting him as an "Adolf Hitler partisan who wears blinkers and skews documents and misrepresents data in order to reach historically untenable conclusions, specifically those that exonerate Hitler."

He also alleges that Lipstadt and her publisher damaged his reputation when they claimed he has "misled academic historians" into "quoting historically invalid points contained in his writings and who applauds the internment of Jews in Nazi concentration camps."

Irving's thesis centers on his assertion that Hitler did not order the Holocaust, did not know of it and was not therefore responsible for it. Irving has also denied that Auschwitz was an extermination camp and claimed that the number of Jews who were killed had been grossly exaggerated.

He says Lipstadt further tarnished his reputation by portraying him as "a dangerous spokesman for Holocaust-denial forces who deliberately and knowingly consorts and consorted with anti-Israel, anti-Semitic and Holocaust-denial forces."

Lipstadt, who holds the Dorot Chair in Modern Jewish and Holocaust Studies at Emory University in Atlanta, says her charges against Irving are "true in substance and in fact," according to depositions filed in the case. Lipstadt will argue at the trial that the 61-year-old Irving is driven by "his obsession with Hitler" and that he "distorts, manipulates and falsifies history in order to put Hitler in a more favorable light, thereby demonstrating a lack of detachment, rationality and judgment necessary for a historian."

Lipstadt, who is being represented by Anthony Julius, a prominent London attorney who was the former lawyer for Princess Diana, has declined to be interviewed before the trial on the advice of her lawyer.

But according to the court papers, she will also contend that Irving has "on numerous occasions denied the Holocaust, the deliberate, planned extermination of Europe's Jewish population by the Nazis, and denied that gas chambers were used by the Nazis as a means of carrying out that extermination."

Irving, who lives in London, himself has disputed the number of Jews who died in concentration camps, suggesting that most deaths were the result of natural causes, and that crematoria and other buildings at concentration camp sites were constructed after World War II. On one occasion, he declared that "about 100,000 people died in Auschwitz in three years" and that "if we must assume generously that a quarter of them were murdered, then we must remember that the British killed 50,000 Germans in one night when they raided Hamburg."

On another occasion, he asserted bluntly, "Auschwitz was not an extermination camp and the Holocaust was a propaganda hoax by the British."

Irving's theories, propounded to an audience of about 800 people in a German restaurant in 1990, led to his conviction in the Munich District Court on charges of defaming and denigrating the memory of the dead. In 1994, a German appeals court not only upheld the conviction, but increased Irving's fine from \$30,000 to \$50,000.

According to Efraim Zuroff, the director of the Israel office of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, the upcoming London case marks the "second stage of Holocaust trials. If, in the past, we have been dealing with the perpetrators of the Holocaust," he told JTA, "we are now dealing with challenges to the historical record." □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES**In Russia and U.S., Jews give Putin mixed reviews***By Lev Gorodetsky*

MOSCOW (JTA) — While Russians are viewing Vladimir Putin's ascent to power as a surprise New Year's present, Jewish observers both in Russia and the United States are decidedly more mixed.

Some share the general Russian population's enthusiasm for Putin, who became president Dec. 31 when Boris Yeltsin suddenly resigned; others are cautiously optimistic.

Still others fear the possibility of increased anti-Semitism and a move away from democracy.

Little was known about Putin when Yeltsin nominated him to be prime minister in August. But Putin's popularity soared in September with the start of the Chechen war, and it has skyrocketed more recently to unprecedented heights, approaching an 80 percent approval rating.

Putin, whose party came in a close second in last month's parliamentary elections, is also seen as being virtually a shoo-in to win Russia's presidential elections, which have now been moved to March from June. Putin has recently cultivated an image of being friendly toward Jews.

In November, he met with leaders of the newly created Lubavitch-dominated Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia, telling them he was sympathetic to Jewish causes.

The move partially backfired when a number of Jewish leaders in Russia complained that Putin had, perhaps inadvertently, singled out one of Russia's umbrella Jewish groups for support in an attempt to divide the Jewish vote.

One Jewish leader who is enthusiastic about Putin is Rabbi Zinovy Kogan, one of the leaders of Reform Judaism in Russia, who called Putin's rise to power "a positive development for Russian Jewry."

Kogan met with Putin last month after the prime minister returned from Norway, where he had met with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak. Putin "spoke very warmly about Barak, saying he was the single one there to support Russia's position over fighting terrorism in Chechnya," said Kogan, who is also one of the leaders of KEROOR, the Congress of Jewish Religious Communities and Organizations of Russia.

Putin said "he was going to supervise personally the investigation of the latest synagogue bombings and some other anti-Semitic acts," Kogan said, referring to the recent wave of attacks.

A Jewish journalist from St. Petersburg who first met Putin when he was an aide to that city's mayor in the early 1990s, said that in discussions about getting humanitarian medical aid from Israel to St. Petersburg, Putin "sounded quite sympathetic toward Israel and Jews in general," said the journalist, who asked not to be identified.

Despite the sense among some that Putin cares about Jews more than Yeltsin, Jews on the whole don't seem as happy as other educated and professional Russians about the rise to power of this former KGB colonel.

"It turns out that the intelligentsia no longer need freedom, but want a tough hand," the well-known pollster Yuri Levada, the director of the All-Russia Center for Public Opinion Research,

said, citing figures that show the Chechen war has more support among the better-educated residents of Moscow and St. Petersburg than in smaller cities and towns. Perhaps Russian Jews diverge from this trend, say observers, because they are less prone to the traditional Russian desire for a strong leader.

At the same time, many fear that the popularity of the Russian war against Chechen rebels could reverberate in Russian society.

The campaign against "Chechen terrorists" could "bring about strengthening of xenophobia in the society which inevitably brings intensification of anti-Semitism," said the St. Petersburg journalist.

In Washington, Micah Naftalin, national director of the Union of Councils for Soviet Jews, agreed.

Putin "has risen to power on the back of a racist war which appeals to the worst xenophobic instincts of the Russians," he said, adding, "We have to monitor him and make sure that he knows what we care about" and that pro-democracy forces and Jewish groups "hold him accountable."

Other leaders of American organizations working with Jews living in the former Soviet Union are taking a wait-and-see attitude about the change of leadership.

In recent weeks, Putin "has talked about fighting the rise in anti-Semitism, and it will be important to see what type of leadership he exerts on this issue," said Mark Levin, executive director of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry.

"He has an opportunity to make his own mark in this area if he wants to," said Levin, whose group met with Putin two years ago.

"With a new Duma coming in and him possibly being elected president, this will be an opportunity for him to state clearly what are his views," he said, referring to Russia's lower house of Parliament.

For many Jews in Russia, Putin remains tainted by the corruption that was so prevalent during Yeltsin's regime.

Some worry that he was shaped by a Jewish media tycoon, who continues to shadow Russia's new leader.

Putin's victory in the parliamentary elections is seen as at least partially attributable to the support of Boris Berezovsky.

Berezovsky's officially state-controlled national TV channel ORT openly manipulated Russian public opinion during the campaign, constantly praising Putin and pounding Putin's rivals for presidency — former Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov and Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov, who is known to be very friendly with another Jewish media tycoon, Vladimir Goussinsky, the head of the Russian Jewish Congress.

A Moscow university lecturer expressed an opinion that is shared by many in Russia's Jewish intelligentsia.

"The guy came to power on the wave of the Chechen war. He seems created by Berezovsky," said Galina Eliasberg. "I don't think he will put the country in order; on the contrary, I have an impression that some force behind him can overwhelm him and then the army will seize power or something like that," she said.

Russia's chief rabbi, Adolph Shayevich, who is active in the Russian Jewish Congress and friendly with Luzhkov, is more cautious in speaking about Putin.

At the official New Year's Eve reception at the Kremlin, Shayevich said Putin told him he wished "happiness and prosperity" to all Jews. But Shayevich added, "It could be only an official gesture. We'll see." □

(JTA staff writer Julie Wiener in New York contributed to this report.)