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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

NEWS ANALYSIS

Sweden fights Holocaust ignorance by hosting forum, sparking education

By Nina Solomin

STOCKHOLM (JTA) — One of the first international political meetings of the new century dealt with ethics and values, rather than issues of war and money.

That's what French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin pointed out as the most significant legacy of the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust, which ended last Friday.

Previous Holocaust-related conferences have dealt with restitution of Nazi-era assets, but this gathering of representatives from 46 countries focused on education, remembrance and research.

The forum ended in declarations that nations must open their World War II-era archives, war criminals must be prosecuted, Holocaust education must be promoted and future attempts at genocide must be prevented.

"The world community should be tremendously grateful to Swedish Prime Minister Goran Persson," said Yehuda Bauer of the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem.

"This is the first time in history that heads of states and top politicians met to discuss educational issues. It has never happened before."

But while Persson won high praise from conference participants, some of his fellow Swedes believe he had political motives in organizing the conference. They suspect Persson mainly wants exposure on the international political scene.

Once looked upon with worldwide approval for its extensive welfare system, the "Swedish model" has been on the retreat in recent years. The Holocaust education project offers a new platform for Sweden to regain its status as a great moral power in the world.

"Persson's action is opportune and well timed, and completely uncontroversial," said Swedish historian Kim Salomon.

Others dismiss such arguments as cheap shots.

"Without obvious indicators that it's all tactics, one should actually believe in him," said Swedish author and former Deputy Prime Minister Per Ahlmark.

Other critics said Sweden has not yet come to terms with its own actions during World War II.

It is not a secret that Swedish neutrality carried a high moral price.

A few examples: The Swedish government allowed German forces to pass through the country on their way to occupied Norway. Not until the end of the war, when it was clear the Allies would win, did Sweden actively start its refugee aid.

Sweden was one of the countries that asked the Germans to put a "J" in the passport of Jews to be able to sort out those refugees.

Before the conference, Persson declared that his government will promote and support research on this era in Swedish history.

He also dedicated about \$5 million to promote Jewish culture, identity and history. The money will be used for a Jewish college in Stockholm.

Many speakers during the conference stressed the importance of learning from the Holocaust to prevent other attempts at "ethnic cleansing," referring to what happened in Rwanda, Kosovo and Bosnia in recent years.

"I am absolutely convinced that continued Holocaust education and awareness will continue to raise our sensitivity and consciousness to mass slaughters and genocide, and

Talks kick off near Jerusalem

Israeli and Palestinian negotiators began intensive negotiations near Jerusalem in an effort to reach a framework for a final peace agreement by a mid-February deadline.

Sunday's meeting was the start of an expected 10 days of discussions that could get a boost Wednesday with the anticipated arrival of U.S. special envoy Dennis Ross.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat are expected to meet later this week at the border between Israel and the Gaza Strip.

In other developments, Arafat met with President Clinton and U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright in Switzerland over the weekend, and Barak traveled to Egypt on Sunday for talks with President Hosni Mubarak.

Mr. Levy goes to Moscow

An Israeli delegation headed by Foreign Minister David Levy was to depart for Moscow for multilateral discussions on the Middle East being held in the Russian capital this week. Syria and Lebanon are boycotting the conference, the first multilateral talks on the region in more than three years.

Haider set to join coalition

A far-right Austrian party appeared set to join the country's governing coalition later this week.

But one of the first acts by the coalition that includes Jorg Haider's Freedom Party could be to establish a compensation fund for slave laborers similar to the one established last year in Germany.

Haider, who has praised some of Hitler's policies in the past, says he supports such a fund.

According to reports, Haider would not take a Cabinet post in the government led by the conservative People's Party.

Vandals strike in Rome

Vandals in Italy spray-painted swastikas, Stars of David and anti-Semitic slogans on about 15 Jewish-owned shops in Rome in an attack coinciding with ceremonies marking the 55th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz.

The attack, in a neighborhood that is home to many Jews, took place late last week.

MIDEAST FOCUS

Likud feuds over boundaries

A Likud Party lawmaker said he favors allowing the Palestinian Authority to set up a local government in Arab areas just outside Jerusalem's municipal boundaries.

The statement by Knesset member Michael Eitan was rejected by party leader Ariel Sharon, who said the areas surrounding Jerusalem must be under sole Israeli control.

Israel's redeployment plan grants the Palestinian Authority civil responsibility in the village of Abu Dis, which is adjacent to Jerusalem

Shell lands near nursery school

A shell that landed near a nursery school in northern Israel caused no injuries.

Israel Radio reported that the shell exploded Sunday before children began arriving at the day care center.

Meanwhile, a commander with the Israel-allied South Lebanon Army was killed Sunday by an explosive planted near his home in Israel's southern Lebanon security zone.

Israelis picnic in the snow

After a rare snowstorm dumped more than a foot of snow on Jerusalem, roads leading to the city were clogged by unprecedented traffic jams caused by Israelis who wanted to see the snow.

The swarm of sightseers created bumper-to-bumper traffic extending some 30 miles from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

The traffic snarl-ups were compounded by the fact that many drivers pulled over onto the road to walk around in the snow and picnic along the highway.

The storm, which brought snow from Israel's north to the Negev Desert, swept the region and caused several deaths due to hypothermia and traffic accidents.



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impel us to prevent them or try to stop them as early as possible," said Stuart Eizenstat, U.S. deputy treasury secretary, who represented the United States in the negotiations leading up to a \$5.2 billion German compensation fund for Nazi-era slave and forced laborers.

Eizenstat also emphasized the importance of nations opening up their Nazi-era archives to scrutiny.

"There is simply no excuse for any country or institution at this point not fully declassifying their archives and their documentation," Eizenstat said.

Conference participants discussed not only the prosecution of aging Nazis and their collaborators, but also those who deny the genocide ever occurred. Irvin Cotler, an expert in human rights law, said Holocaust deniers should be brought to justice.

"This is not a matter of free speech. They are engaged in an international criminal conspiracy to cover up the biggest crime in history. They are undermining the very values of free speech," Cotler said.

Neo-Nazi activity in Sweden, once considered a problem mainly for the Jewish community, has gotten a lot of attention in the past 12 months.

Last spring theater director Lars Noren caused a huge debate when he used convicted neo-Nazis as amateur actors in a play in which they were allowed to express their racist ideology on stage.

The story took an ironic but tragic twist when the actors used their rehearsals outside a jail as an opportunity to plan a robbery, which resulted in a police officer's death.

Also, there was a bomb attack on a journalist covering neo-Nazis in Sweden, and a union member in Stockholm was shot to death after he had publicly opposed the possible membership of a neo-Nazi.

Lack of knowledge among Swedes about the Holocaust was what Persson said had spurred the Stockholm conference, along with his "Living History" project, a national campaign to enlighten people about the Holocaust.

Persson had cited a survey that showed every third high school student in Sweden wasn't sure whether the Holocaust had taken place.

Soon afterward, a booklet about the history of the Holocaust was distributed free to anyone interested. Schools were provided with extensive educational material.

A short time later, however, it was revealed that the survey's numbers had been misinterpreted and lack of knowledge about the Holocaust among schoolchildren was not so widespread.

But by then the project was already under way.

It led to the creation of a nine-country Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research that helps train teachers to teach about the Holocaust.

At the suggestion of Holocaust survivor and Nobel Prize laureate Elie Wiesel, there will be an annual conference on "Conscience and Humanism" in Stockholm.

"I don't know what your role will be in Swedish history, but I know what it will be in Jewish history," Wiesel told Persson in his opening remarks at the conference. "It will be glorious." □

Poll: Israelis believe Barak knew

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Most Israelis believe Prime Minister Ehud Barak knew some fund-raising activity for his campaign in last May's election was improper, according to a recent poll conducted for the newspaper Yediot Achronot.

Fifty-six percent said Barak knew the nonprofit organizations working for his election acted improperly, 36 percent said he did not know and 8 percent had no opinion.

In the wake of a report by the state comptroller, Israel's attorney general last week ordered a police probe of suspected campaign finance violations by Barak's party, One Israel, in last year's election.

Of the 15 parties elected to the Knesset, the state comptroller found that only three — Yisrael Ba'Aliyah, National Unity and Shinui — did not violate campaign finance rules. □

JEWISH WORLD

Accord reached on French claims

French Jews and the World Jewish Congress will monitor efforts to resolve Holocaust-era claims, according to an agreement with the French government.

Last week's accord, which settles a disagreement among the parties involved over whether international Jewry should be involved in the issue, paves the way for the WJC and CRIF, an umbrella organization for French Jews, to serve on a French committee that will decide how to distribute restitution.

Slave claims could start soon

U.S. Deputy Treasury Secretary Stuart Eizenstat says an agreement on distributing payments to survivors of Nazi-era forced and slave laborers would be reached in four to six weeks.

Eizenstat, the Clinton administration's point man on Holocaust restitution issues, said at the International Forum on the Holocaust held in Sweden last week that claims could start to be processed by the end of the year.

Negotiations on how to distribute the \$5.2 billion fund to be set up by the German government and industry were expected to resume in Washington on Monday.

Neo-Nazis protest memorial

An estimated 500 neo-Nazis demonstrated at the site in Berlin where Germany plans to build a national Holocaust memorial.

Saturday's protesters also marched through Berlin's Brandenburg Gate, where Nazi troops used to hold processions and where neo-Nazi demonstrators have been banned in the past.

German police had barred the group from demonstrating but a court overturned the decision last Friday.

Film honored at Sundance

A film exploring the Nazis' persecution of homosexuals won the documentary directing award at the Sundance Film Festival.

Directors Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman took the prize Saturday for their film "Paragraph 175."

Doctors hail chicken soup

Two Israeli doctors nominated chicken soup for the World Health Organization's list of essential drugs.

The two physicians used references to the medical writings of Maimonides and the Talmud, as well as a Web site address with chicken soup recipes and a medical journal article in which the staple of Ashkenazi Jews was cited for increasing "nasal mucous velocity."

But they admitted that there was no "significantly statistical evidence" to support their claim.

FOCUS ON ISSUES

U.S. feminists find common cause with Israel's Western Wall activists

By Jessica Steinberg

JERUSALEM (JTA) — It's been 12 years since Women of the Wall began meeting to pray at the Western Wall, but a recent prayer session was particularly poignant for several U.S. Jewish feminist leaders reciting the morning blessings.

"Listening to these women sing together, it absolutely ran through me," said former New York judge Karen Burstein of the Jan. 26 gathering. "Prayer was a very distant concept for me, but this has been a very opening experience."

About 100 women attended last week's America-Israel Dialogue in Jerusalem, co-sponsored by the American Jewish Congress Commission for Women's Equality and the Israel Women's Network.

The weeklong dialogue took stock of the status of Jewish women and plotted a course of action for the future.

While the conference discussions on Israeli feminism, women's health and domestic violence were spirited and meaningful, participants agreed that this grouping of women of all ages and backgrounds praying together on a wintry January morning was one of the week's highlights.

"Religious pluralism has to become an elevated value in Israel," Burstein said. "I want to bring equality here. I want to support women because this is a holy place."

In the past few decades, awareness of the challenges facing women has increased among Israelis, said former U.S. Rep. Elizabeth Holtzman, another conference participant. But, she added, women still don't have full equality — as evidenced by the dilemma facing Women of the Wall.

There is a court decision pending in Israel's Supreme Court regarding the group's right to pray at the wall.

The women meet at least once a month on Rosh Chodesh, the first day of the Hebrew month, as well as during holidays and for their daughters' Bat Mitzvahs.

They chant the morning Shacharit service together, clustered in a tight group at the back of the women's section. When it's time to read the Torah, they adjourn to a courtyard behind the Western Wall plaza, near Yeshivat HaKotel, some taking the opportunity to lay tefillin and take out their tallitot from under their coats.

Yet even this arrangement is currently being re-examined by the Supreme Court.

According to Jerusalem City Council member Anat Hoffman, one of the founding members of the group, the women's right to pray together at the wall is not being declared illegal according to Jewish law. Rather, the court is concerned about protecting the women from the other religious factions that aren't pleased with the group's efforts.

One compromise suggested by the court is letting the women go to the wall with their Torah for one hour each month on Rosh Chodesh. The judges are also exploring the general wall area, looking for an alternative prayer space for the women to meet.

Neither option is acceptable, said Hoffman. "We're modern Marranos," she said, referring to the Jews forced to hide their Jewishness during the Spanish Inquisition. "We're hiding here in this courtyard and we want to wear our tallitot and tefillin out in the open."

There's also a local yeshiva claiming ownership of the courtyard and threatening to prevent the women from holding their occasional gatherings there. In fact, several fervently Orthodox men hovered outside the courtyard gate last week, looking askance at the women reading from the Torah.

At the conference's final session, the participants sponsored a call to action, pledging their support for freedom from religious coercion in Israel and the Diaspora. They also endorsed the right of all Israelis to civil marriage and divorce, urging the Knesset to enact legislation on those issues.

There's room for improvement, admitted Orthodox feminist Rivka Haupt, one of the group's founders, but there have been drastic improvements in the last 12 years.

"We used to whisper, now we're davening out loud. I consider that great progress," Haupt said. □

As his 'second coming' ends, Israeli ambassador says this is it

By Michael Shapiro

WASHINGTON (JTA) — During the last few weeks, Zalman Shoval put the finishing touches on what he describes as his "second coming" as Israel's ambassador to the United States: He delivered a speech at the National Press Club, hosted a party at his official residence for more than 400 Beltway types and was feted by Jewish leaders in the posh New York home of cosmetics heir Ronald Lauder.

This time, however, Shoval believes these latest farewells are for good.

He does not think he will become the first Israeli to serve as ambassador to Washington three times.

"When I left the last time, although I never rationalized it, I had a good sense that I might come back for a second time," Shoval said in a recent interview with JTA before heading back to Israel.

"I had a feeling and I guess that was one of the reasons that I never wrote a book of my first term, although I had all the material for it, because I didn't want to burn any bridges."

While Shoval still has yet to decide if he is going to burn those bridges, he said he is planning to spend time with his family and return to his business ventures.

He also has been asked to head the board of trustees of a new academic institution.

"I will try to remain involved, but you can be involved in different ways," he said.

Shoval, who has said he was bitten by the political bug early on in life, said he is not sure if he would run again for the Knesset, where he served some 13 years, mostly as a member of the Likud Party.

"I still have it, but even bugs get older," said Shoval, 69.

The former ambassador cleared out his office earlier this month and was immediately replaced by Israel's new ambassador, David Ivry.

Ivry is a former general who commanded Israel's air force and has headed the Jewish state's strategic relationship with the United States since 1986.

Shoval's second stint as ambassador ended just like his first — the Likud prime minister that had sent him to Washington was defeated by the opposition candidate.

"Every time I come here, for some reason, the government falls down," he said during the reception he and his wife, Kena, hosted.

Both times, Shoval continued to serve the new Labor governments until his replacement was named.

In 1992, when Yitzhak Shamir was defeated by Yitzhak Rabin, Shoval stayed on in Washington for nine months until he was replaced by Itamar Rabinovich.

This time around, Shoval has served the government of Ehud Barak, who defeated Benjamin Netanyahu.

Netanyahu is the man who tapped Shoval for his second tour in 1998, last May.

Observers say Shoval has been able to serve four prime ministers of two different parties because of his professionalism and moderation.

Shoval is "one of the most interesting Likud politicians in my mind because he comes from a background and an ideology of moderation and compromise which reflects his Dayanist and Ben-Gurionist roots but he has also been a very effective spokesman for the Likud Party," said Samuel Lewis, a former U.S. ambassador to Israel.

"He is not an ideologue but a man of great wisdom, moderation, stature and very wise counsel which he has provided prime ministers with over the last 30 years," Lewis added in introducing Shoval during one of his recent farewell speeches.

Shoval was elected to the Knesset for the first time in 1970 as a member of the independent Rafi Party founded by David Ben-Gurion, who had left the Labor Party.

Shoval said it has not been hard to serve prime ministers of both parties. "The moment I became an ambassador I stopped being a politician," he said.

"Both my friends and my political opponents knew that. When I left this time to come here, Barak even came to my farewell party."

But Shoval said it goes deeper than that.

Beyond what he calls the "the more ideologically inclined fringes on both sides of the political spectrum," Shoval said there is a consensus in Israel on certain issues, including Jerusalem and not going back to the pre-1967 borders.

"It didn't make much difference who was in power," he said, adding that Netanyahu and Barak have been less ideological and more pragmatic than Shamir and Rabin.

"In our case security must precede anything else."

While Shoval says an agreement with Syria would contribute to that security, he has been warning that a peace deal with Syria and Lebanon will not lead to the "comprehensive peace" many in Washington, including President Clinton, have been talking about.

"Syria no longer holds a stranglehold in this respect, and in any case, comprehensive peace is not all that comprehensive, looking at Iran or Iraq in the not-too-distant neighborhood," he said during a Jan. 11 speech at the National Press Club.

Contrary to what he called "rather half-baked theories that peace between Israel and Syria would automatically bring about the lessening of Iran's anti-peace and anti-Israel stance," he said, "the opposite may actually be true."

During the interview, Shoval stressed several times that a peace deal between Israel and Syria is not only important for the Jewish state but for the United States, which will be expected to support the deal with billions of dollars in aid.

Since the deal will help "cement" the U.S. position in the region, Shoval warned against a repeat of the Wye aid battle, where the money became a political football between the White House and Congress.

"There is a lesson to learn from that and that lesson should be learned less perhaps by Israel and more by the administration," Shoval said.

"Undoubtedly, it will be a very major proposition to get the probably very considerable amounts of aid — which will be needed over the next few years as a result of an agreement with Syria and Lebanon, let alone the Palestinians — through Congress," he said, adding that this "should not objectively be seen as only aid to Israel but also as a vital American interest, namely to promote the stability in one of the few areas that the U.S. itself has declared to be a region where America has vital interests." □