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83rd Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Haider's party to be sworn in

Austria's president plans to swear in a new government Friday that includes the far-right party of Jorg Haider.

Thomas Klestil announced the move after Haider pledged in writing to work toward creating an atmosphere "in which xenophobia, anti-Semitism and racism have no place."

Klestil had demanded that Haider and People's Party leader Wolfgang Schussel sign a pro-democracy declaration before he approved their coalition agreement.

According to the coalition agreement, Haider will not hold a Cabinet post.

Summit ends in failure

A summit between Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat ended Thursday amid Palestinian declarations that the talks have reached a crisis.

The key difference between the two sides centers on an Israeli withdrawal from an additional 6 percent of the West Bank, a move expected to take place next week.

The Palestinians have demanded that Israel hand over Jerusalem suburbs.

But these areas are not part of the withdrawal, according to Israeli settlers who have seen the redeployment maps.

Meanwhile, officials from both sides are saying the gaps are so wide it is unlikely they will meet a mid-February deadline for drafting a framework of a final peace accord.

Clinton calls for reconciliation

President Clinton spoke out against intolerance during the annual National Prayer Breakfast in Washington.

Citing examples on the international stage where reconciliation is needed, the president said, "In the Middle East, with all its hope, we are still having to work very hard to overcome the profoundest of suspicions between Israeli Jews and Palestinian and Syrian Arabs."

Turning to the domestic arena, he added, "Here at home we still see Asians, blacks, gays, even in one instance last year children at a Jewish school, subject to attacks just because of who they are."

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

Azerbaijani Jews revive, but with one eye on aliyah

By Avi Machlis

BAKU, Azerbaijan (JTA) — When Samir Salimov returned from Israel to his hometown of Baku last week, his mother could instantly tell from his smile that she had made the best choice for her son.

Three months earlier, she had sent him off to a high school program in Israel.

A short drive around this economically depressed city, with endless rows of gray, decaying Soviet housing blocks, makes it easy to understand why the Salimovs see Israel as a promised land.

It also explains why a family is willing to endure the pain of sending a soft-spoken 15-year-old boy abroad to an unknown country on his own.

Hosting a group of American Jews last week in their cramped living room, the Salimovs explained that they are monitoring their son's progress before they decide whether they too will leave for Israel.

"Samir has discovered his Jewish gene and he likes it," explains Anna Salimov, his mother, who herself is not Jewish but feels she has joined the Jewish people through her husband and son. "He has been exposed to an entire new world of Jewish tradition, Jewish history and Jewish heritage, and we like it as well."

Yet the Salimov family's rediscovery of their Jewish roots at home, while they consider a future in Israel, illustrates the two separate mindsets that mass immigration from Azerbaijan is creating for Jewish organizations. Though all agree that the primary goal is to encourage immigration to Israel, there is a growing debate over the value of investing in building communities whose numbers are rapidly declining.

Last week more than 90 Jewish federation leaders witnessed the work of the Jewish Agency for Israel and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee in Baku on their annual Voyage of Discovery mission. Jewish federations in North America funneled the bulk of \$300 million spent overseas last year to these two groups, with the agency receiving the lion's share. Over the past decade, these funds have helped finance the immigration of more than 835,000 Jews from countries of the former Soviet Union, and provided crucial relief and community services for those who stayed.

The flow of Jews from Azerbaijan continues, with more than 1,000 leaving for Israel last year and a similar number expected this year.

The Jewish Agency is also continuing to run an array of supporting operations, attended by 6,400 people last year, from youth clubs to Hebrew classes and student programs like the one attended by Salimov. Tens of thousands more participate in similar programs throughout the former Soviet Union.

This is true even in Baku, with 14,000 Jews among the 1.7 million population, which has been a unique home for Jews over the past century compared to other cities in the former Soviet Union.

Azerbaijan's dwindling Jewish community has fallen from 55,000 in 1989 to about 17,000 Jews today. About 90 percent of the community is made up of Mountain Jews, an ancient Sephardi community, which some scholars say traces its roots to a group that fled Jerusalem after the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE. Most of the rest are Russian Ashkenazi Jews who arrived over the past two centuries, as the Russian empire expanded and the oil-rich city grew.

Despite their small numbers, Jews have consistently played prominent roles in the city's professional and cultural life. Over the decades, the city's Jewish community also

MIDEAST FOCUS

Wiesel, others blast Syria

Nobel Peace laureate Elie Wiesel joined other prominent Jews in condemning a recent editorial in an official Syrian newspaper that accused Israel of magnifying the scope of the Holocaust for its own benefit.

The condemnation is slated to appear as a full-page ad in newspapers across the United States, according to the ad's organizer, the Zionist Organization of America.

The ad calls on Syrian President Hafez Assad to condemn the editorial.

Helicopter purchase stalled

A \$450 million Israeli purchase of U.S. Apache attack helicopters is stalled because U.S. officials are refusing to give Israel the helicopter system's software codes.

Israeli officials said Wednesday they are requesting the codes so they would be able to modify the helicopters to meet future needs.

Minister vows no change in law

Israel's interior minister, on a recent three-day visit to Russia, told Jewish leaders that the Law of Return should not be changed, at least not without consulting with Diaspora Jewry.

Natan Sharansky also asked Russia's foreign minister to allow Russian-born Israeli pensioners to enter Russia without a visa.

Israel film festival expands

The annual Israel Film Festival has added Miami and Chicago to its traditional New York and Los Angeles venues, to become "the largest showcase of Israeli films ever offered in the United States," according to festival founder and director Meir Fenigstein.

The festival of 40 Israeli films will open in Miami on Feb. 3 to Feb. 10, followed by New York from Feb. 23 to March 9, Los Angeles from March 29 to April 13 and Chicago from April 29 to May 4.



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produced prominent figures, including Lev Landau, winner of the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1962, and Garry Kasparov, the world chess champion. Most importantly, say Jewish and non-Jewish residents of Baku, the city has always been ethnically diverse and cosmopolitan, and was particularly tolerant of all minorities.

"I have lived here for 75 years and never heard anyone call me zhid," says Leonid Veyseyskey, 75, citing a common anti-Semitic slur. "We were all Bakuvians."

Today, he and his wife, Frida, are sadly on common ground with their non-Jewish friends and neighbors. They are all equally poor.

Before perestroika, or the restructuring of the Soviet economy and society in the late 1980s, Leonid was an agricultural and construction engineer. He earned about 500 rubles a month, worth roughly \$500 at the time. Now, after the economic collapse of the region, the couple together takes home a monthly pension of just \$50.

Once, they used to take vacations regularly. Now, in the drab yellow light of their lifelong home, the Veyseyskeys' only escape from boredom is an extensive library of music and books, including Russian translations of Mark Twain and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Yet as the can of coffee from Israel on a shelf indicates, their lot is somewhat better than that of their neighbors.

The JDC provides food and medicine for them and another 2,700 Bakuvian Jews through the Hesed Gershon welfare agency. The Hesed organization feeds some 190,000 people in 1,100 cities and towns across the former Soviet Union.

Many of their friends and family have moved to Israel, but this is not an option for the elderly ailing couple. "It would be very difficult," says Frida Veyseyskey. "God does not want us to go."

The situation is not much better here for the younger generation. Despite massive offshore oil deposits that have attracted some of the world's biggest energy companies, unemployment is rampant and per capita annual income is about \$600. Few local residents believe that future profits from oil income will filter down to the street.

It is not surprising that Moshe Becker, president of the Baku society of Ashkenazi Jews, says the economy is the biggest issue for the future of the Jewish community here.

Although he hails a revival of Jewish life in the city, when asked what he would like Jews to do for the community, Becker says, "Money needs to be invested in the economy so that there will be employment opportunities."

Ultimately, predicts Steve Schwager, director of the JDC in the former Soviet Union, enough Jews will remain here to warrant investing in community building. He estimates that about 85 percent of the 1.5 million Jews across the former Soviet Union are completely detached from the Jewish people, and the challenge is to reconnect them.

"Aliyah will continue," he says when asked about the future of Baku. "But on the other hand there will be a vibrant active community here." The JDC wants to continue bolstering its services by building more Jewish community centers as meeting places for Jews throughout the former Soviet Union.

It is a mission, he says, that is directly linked to the Jewish Agency's agenda. "To have aliyah, you have to have Jews," says Schwager, adding that the JDC's community building programs are designed to "create Jews." But Jewish Agency activists in the area are unconvinced. Although they support the relief work, some say it is a lost cause.

"There is no place here for a Jewish community," says Arye Resnick, the Jewish Agency's emissary to Azerbaijan, speaking on the sidelines of a winter camp where 160 children sporting balloons and singing Hebrew songs give the impression that perhaps there is a future for this community.

"This generation may be the last generation that can keep the traditions from their parents," he says. "All of the things we do here are a trigger to get them out."

The dual strategies of community building and promoting aliyah could soon emerge as a central theme as the JDC and the Jewish Agency vie for funds under the new structure of the United Jewish Communities, which will give individual federations more power over overseas allocations.

Sallai Meridor, chairman of the Jewish Agency, insists that aliyah should be the top priority because it is the best alternative for individuals and for Israel. He hopes there will be no competition between the agencies.

However, as Meridor looks at the dwindling number of Jews in Baku, he concludes that within 20 years there will only be the "remnants" of a Jewish community. □

JEWISH WORLD

Groups pull out of Austria

An umbrella group of European rabbis is moving its March conference from Vienna to protest the scheduled inclusion of the the extremist Freedom Party in the Austrian government.

The Conference of European Rabbis has not decided where the meeting will be held, but says it does not feel comfortable meeting in Austria as long as the party headed by Jorg Haider, who has made pro-Nazi statements and whose party contains an anti-immigrant platform, is part of the ruling coalition.

Meanwhile, the Simon Wiesenthal Center is pulling out of a joint project with Austria aimed at fostering tolerance among youth.

In a letter to Wolfgang Schussel, whose People's Party is poised to form a government with the Freedom Party, the center said such a coalition makes it morally impossible to continue the planned project.

"It would be unthinkable to pursue such a project, which is aimed at combating the very positions of your new partner," the letter said.

L.A. residents meet on hate crime

Los Angeles-area residents met for the first in a series of town meetings on hate crimes.

The meeting, which was attended by state and local officials, comes after last August's wounding of five victims at a Jewish community center and the murder of a Filipino American postal worker.

At the meeting, Police Chief Bernard Parks said hate crimes increased by 22% in 1999 in the San Fernando Valley, where the shootings occurred.

JNF to honor Cardinal O'Connor

The Jewish National Fund plans to commemorate the 80th birthday of New York's Cardinal John O'Connor by planting trees in his honor in a new "Papal Forest" in Jerusalem. The forest will be inaugurated during the pope's visit to Israel in March.

Germany may charge 2 Jews

Germany is investigating two Jewish members of the World War II Resistance on charges they attempted to poison more than 2,000 imprisoned SS veterans after the war, according to the Times of London.

The possible case against Leipke Distel, 77, and Joseph Harmatz, 74, has prompted neo-Nazi groups to say they will cover the costs of any former SS workers who come forward to testify. The two men were members of a Jewish group known as The Avengers.

Polish museum tabs architect

A U.S. architect will design a \$50 million Jewish history museum in Poland. Frank Gehry, whose parents were born in Lodz, Poland, is known for designing the Guggenheim Modern Art Museum in Spain.

Bush says Nation of Islam is based on the notion of 'love your neighbor'

By Michael Shapiro

WASHINGTON (JTA) — While many regard the Nation of Islam to be an anti-Semitic group, Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush recently had some kind words for the followers of the group's leader, Louis Farrakhan.

When asked by the Fox network's Tony Snow on Sunday if the Nation of Islam is a faith-based organization, Bush said, "I think it is. I think it's based upon some universal principles," such as "love your neighbor like you'd like to be loved yourself." Bush said that those in the group who accept that notion have their hearts "set right to help a neighbor in need."

Snow asked the question in context of the issue of charitable choice, which would provide public funding to faith-based organizations to run such programs as homeless shelters or drug abuse programs. The idea is supported by all the presidential candidates.

Asked by Snow if his response about the Nation of Islam meant that he would not mind having taxpayer money go to the group, Bush said, "I don't like taxpayer money to support any religion."

"What I like is taxpayers' money to support people who are seeking some kind of help, people that are trying to find some better answer to their lives. I don't believe government ought to fund religion. I believe government can and should fund the people who are trying to help — and programs that help change people's lives."

Jewish Democrats criticized Bush's comments on the Nation of Islam, questioning his characterization of the group and attacked his "expansive view of government funding of religious organizations" to include the Nation of Islam.

"If the principles that he's speaking about are hatred, anti-Semitism and fear and loathing of others, then he is right," said Ira Forman, executive director of the National Jewish Democratic Council.

"But if he means anything else, he clearly does not understand the first thing about the Nation of Islam."

In discussing their support for charitable choice, both the Democrats, Vice President Al Gore and Bill Bradley, have said safeguards need to be put in place to prohibit proselytizing and maintain a strict separation of church and state.

Under Gore's proposal, religious institutions could receive federal funds for drug treatment programs, services for the homeless and initiatives to combat youth violence "without having to alter the religious character that is so often the key to their effectiveness."

But he has said secular alternatives should always be available and that people in need must not be required to participate in religious observances.

For his part, Bush has pledged to funnel \$8 billion in public funds into faith-based organizations and set up an office at the White House to deal with the issue. The other top Republican candidate, Arizona Sen. John McCain, also backs expanding charitable choice and has said he supports Bush's approach.

Bush has not spoken about maintaining safeguards in the manner of Gore and Bradley, saying religion is fundamental to the success of the programs.

Bush spokesman Scott McClellan would not specifically address Bush's comments or view of the Nation of Islam, only saying that the governor has "laid out a detailed plan to reach out to faith-based groups, churches, synagogues and charities to help those in need."

He added later, "There is no place for racism or anti-Semitism anywhere."

"Gov. Bush said we should fund programs that help people in need, not for the purposes of supporting any religion," he said.

"Gov. Bush has made it clear that he will continue the commitment to pluralism, not discriminating for or against Christians, Jews or Muslims or good people of no faith at all."

McClellan also said that Bush believes that "participation in faith-based programs should be truly voluntary and that there should be secular alternatives." □

Behind headlines, Jerusalem Post deals with labor, editorial disputes

By Avi Machlis

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Every time Tom Rose, chief executive and publisher of The Jerusalem Post, leaves his office at the newspaper, he passes by a bright yellow sign posted on his wall that screams "Tom Rose Go Home."

The sign is proof that he has no illusions about what his employees think of him, Rose jokes.

Many journalists at the newspaper believe that what they call the ruthless managerial tactics Rose has deployed since joining the newspaper in 1998 could spell disaster for an institution that has been Israel's venerable voice to the outside world for decades.

Yet Rose remains sanguine when discussing plans to wrap up a labor dispute and push through sweeping job cuts. At the same time, he is trying to lead the paper past a turbulent time during which two senior editors have recently resigned.

"There really has not been a dramatic shakeup here in a long time," Rose said, talking about plans to streamline the financially troubled newspaper. "The issue is really grow or die — and we choose the former."

The recent unrest is the latest tumultuous chapter at the Post since it was taken over by Hollinger International, the Canadian newspaper conglomerate, in 1989. Following the takeover, as the newspaper's editorial line shifted from left toward center-right, more than two dozen journalists resigned. Many left to create the Jerusalem Report, today a bimonthly magazine that also has been bought out by Hollinger.

Yet the real trigger for the Post's tricky situation today is competition. For decades since its founding in 1932, the Jerusalem Post, known in prestate days as the Palestine Post, was a monopoly in the small market for English speakers in Israel, today totaling about 150,000. But in 1997, Ha'aretz, a leading Hebrew daily newspaper, launched an English-language version together with the International Herald Tribune.

Although Rose says circulation has increased slightly since then, now that English-speaking Israelis, tourists and Internet readers have a choice, the Post has been challenged to improve.

Both newspapers have strengths and weaknesses. Many readers consider Ha'aretz to be a premier source of scoops and higher quality analysis. But as a translated newspaper it is often riddled with errors. It also has a leftist editorial line.

The Jerusalem Post is considered by many to be Israel's English-language journal of record, though not always at the cutting edge of the political and business news fronts. According to Rose, its editorial line is strategically positioned at the center-right to capture the large number of right-wing English speakers in Israel without alienating readers of other political persuasions.

However, the recent resignations of centrists Hirsh Goodman as editorial vice chairman after nearly two years, and David Makovsky as executive editor after just five months, have led some observers to wonder whether the Post is poised to shift further rightward. Goodman, who had initially left the Post when Hollinger took over to become editor in chief of the Jerusalem Report, says he stepped down for personal reasons.

But Makovsky, who declined to comment for the record, is said to have resigned over an editorial dispute.

Makovsky, a veteran diplomatic journalist, has reported in the past for The Jerusalem Post and Ha'aretz.

During his tenure, Makovsky had been asked to publish a regular opinion column by David Bar-Illan, a former editor of the Jerusalem Post who served as media adviser to former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, on the front page. In the international newspaper industry, opinion columns are rarely positioned so prominently. More recently, say Makovsky's supporters, he was asked to write an editorial opposing the peace process with Syria. He also felt that the sweeping job cuts Rose planned to implement would cripple the newspaper and irrevocably damage its quality.

Rose rejected reports of an editorial dispute as "totally untrue" and added: "The editorial line has not changed and will not change." Jeff Barak, Makovsky's predecessor, who is considered left of center, is poised to fill one of the vacant senior editorial positions later this year, Rose said.

Meanwhile, Rose is faced with labor problems that are no less daunting than the editorial issues. At the end of 1999, Post journalists who were working under a union contract launched a series of demonstrations against Rose's plans to change their contracts, which expired in December. They said the changes, which would make it easier to dismiss union employees, would leave them vulnerable to management and compromise their editorial standards.

"For a journalist, living in fear of losing your job for any reason is extremely problematic because one of the reasons for being dismissed can be that you've offended a client or a friend or a crony of the publisher," said Esther Hecht, a union activist who works at the Post. Hecht also warned that plans to cut the workforce dramatically would be catastrophic.

"This paper has a very long history as the paper of record in English and Israel's window to the world," she said. "If the staff is cut to the point that there are not enough people to cover major beats, and the coverage and editing is done by people who don't know the country because they just got off the boat, the paper cannot do its job properly."

As the two sides work out a new contract, Rose told the Post's editorial staff that the newspaper was about to embark upon the equivalent of "basketball tryouts." Insiders say up to 35 percent of the newspaper's 55 editorial employees may find themselves off the team, and union members are believed to be blacklisted.

Rose defends the job cuts, saying since the newspaper spends an unsustainably high amount of money on bloated contracts to union journalists.

"The whole issue is how to best position this paper in business for the future," Rose said, promising that The Jerusalem Post will become a better-written newspaper that is more focused on issues of concern to English-speaking readers.

Post insiders say the plan may also include new agreements to buy outside content such as the recent launch of pages from The Wall Street Journal, and possibly, an agreement with an overseas Jewish newspaper like the Forward. But while some nonunion journalists think the cuts could position the newspaper for a brighter future, many remain completely confused by the strategy and say the plans remain shrouded in a thick fog.

Rose's success or failure in clearing up that fog and leading the Post into the new millennium could impact not only the newspaper's employees and reputation, but thousands of English-reading news junkies from Israel and abroad alike. □