



Daily News Bulletin

Vol. 78, No. 37

Friday, February 25, 2000

83rd Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Secret talks with Syria denied

Israel denied media reports that the United States had mediated secret contacts with Damascus during the freeze of formal negotiations.

Prime Minister Ehud Barak's office also denied that Israel had agreed to return the Golan Heights during the secret talks.

The Ma'ariv and New York Post newspapers reported this week that the United States had mediated a secret peace deal between the Jewish state and Syria.

Formal negotiations between the two countries stalled last month over differences about the future of the Golan.

U.S. renews offer to Tehran

Secretary of State Madeleine Albright renewed a U.S. offer to open discussions with Iran.

Albright also said the United States would watch very carefully how Tehran responds to the strong showing by reformers in last Friday's vote in Iran "and the message that it sends from the Iranian people that they want some change."

JCPA head retiring

The head of the umbrella organization for Jewish community relations councils around the United States will retire at the end of the year.

The Jewish Council for Public Affairs announced it will form a search committee to find a successor to Lawrence Rubin, who has served in the post for 10 years.

Levy softens 'blood' threat

Israel would strike back forcefully if its civilians were attacked from Lebanon, but there is no standing policy to launch such attacks, Foreign Minister David Levy said.

Trying to take the heat off controversial remarks made in the Knesset on Wednesday, Levy told Israel Radio that his declaration that Israel would respond "blood for blood" and "child for child" if residents of northern Israel were the target of attacks from Lebanon was intended to convey the gravity of the security situation and send a strong message to Syria to rein in Hezbollah.

His Knesset remarks generated volleys of sharp criticism from Syria and Lebanon. [Page 2]

Latvia says it will go after Nazis, but critics have heard that before

By Michael Shapiro

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Nazi hunters from around the globe are keeping a wary eye on Latvia.

While they welcomed Latvia's announcement that it is committed to investigating suspected Nazi-era war criminals, they are cautioning that they have heard such promises before.

Latvia's announcement came at the end of a two-day conference held last week in Riga, the country's capital, where government officials from the United States, Canada, Australia, Great Britain, Germany and Israel discussed the Baltic nation's failure to convict any suspected Nazis since it gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.

U.S. officials pressed for the conference amid recent publicity surrounding Konrad Kalejs, who for years has faced charges of being involved in the slaughter of civilians when he served as an officer in Latvia's notorious Arajs Kommando unit.

The militia is held directly responsible for the deaths of some 100,000 civilians, including 30,000 Jews, between 1941 and 1943.

About 75,000 Jews, or more than 90 percent of Latvia's prewar Jewish community, were murdered by the Nazis — with help from local residents.

Kalejs, 86, has said he was ordered by German officers to head an Arajs Kommando unit, but he has denied being present when civilians were shot.

U.S. and Jewish groups pressured Latvia to extradite Kalejs for trial after he was found by Nazi hunters in a retirement home in Britain late last year.

Kalejs, who was deported from the United States and Canada in the early 1990s for lying about his wartime record, fled in January from Britain to Australia, where he has had citizenship since 1957 and where he is still living now. During the conference, Latvia's prosecutor general, Janis Skrastins, pledged Latvia's "readiness and commitment" to "investigate Nazi-sponsored crimes committed on Latvian territory during World War II and to prosecute persons who have committed these crimes."

Latvia agreed to update all of the countries in three months about the progress of its investigations. The other countries pledged to assist Latvian authorities in the investigations, and Latvia and Australia agreed to negotiate an extradition treaty, which could lead to Kalejs' being tried in Latvia.

Eli Rosenbaum, director of the U.S. Justice Department's Nazi-hunting Office of Special Investigations, welcomed the developments. But in an interview with JTA, he said the Latvians have not kept their promises in the past.

"Obviously the U.S. was very disappointed with what it learned about Latvia's failure to seriously investigate these cases during its nine years of independence," said Rosenbaum, who did not attend the conference but sent two aides.

"This failure undermines Riga's public announcement over the years that they were in fact investigating these cases.

"This is the last moment in history" for Latvia to prosecute aging suspected Nazis, he added.

Rosenbaum would not go into details, but suggested that Latvia will reconsider evidence gathered by the United States as part of their investigation into Kalejs' activities during the war.

Efraim Zuroff, director of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Jerusalem, suggested that the Latvian pledge could be a "positive step," but said they must now follow

MIDEAST FOCUS

Ross meets with Mubarak

U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross held talks Thursday with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak as he continued efforts to restart Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations.

Palestinian officials have rejected Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak's gestures, including his willingness to make slight adjustments to the maps for the next handover of 6.1 percent of West Bank land.

Arabs to study Torah

All Israeli state schools, including those in Arab areas, will be required to teach Torah studies, according to a new law that religious parties pushed through a virtually empty Knesset.

Rabbi Michael Melchior, minister for Israeli society and world Jewish communities, said decisions like this should be made after a dialogue and that quickie legislation on such matters only "distances people" from Judaism.

Sharon opposes new party

Israeli opposition leader Ariel Sharon is opposed to reported efforts to mobilize a new right-wing party headed by former Likud Party Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Sharon was quoted by the Israeli daily Ha'aretz as warning that the move would hamper efforts to bring down the current government.

Soldier detained for false report

An Israeli military court extended by four days the detention of a soldier who admitted to falsely reporting he saw another soldier take a ride from a car with Palestinian plates.

The soldier's claim prompted massive searches and an investigation into a possible terrorist kidnapping. The soldier said he had wanted to impress his commanders and test the level of readiness on his base.



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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through. "We are waiting to see what happens in actual terms," he said in an interview from Jerusalem.

Meanwhile, Jewish activists in Riga, where 90 percent of Latvia's 12,000 Jews live, were disappointed that they were not invited to last week's conference.

"The conference went nearly unnoticed, because only officials were invited," said Michail Avrutin, the Union of Councils for Soviet Jews' representative in Riga. "It is regrettable because it should have been a major event for the Jewish community."

Grigory Krupnikov, a leader of the Latvian Jewish community, called the conference a "positive event," saying what is most important is not the issue of whether Kalejs will be brought to justice, but raising "public awareness of such phenomena as fascism and Nazism."

Grigory Bikson, a teacher at a Jewish high school in Riga, shared this sentiment, particularly because he feels that anti-Semitism in Latvia is rising.

"We have every year more and more fascist publications here spreading allegations that Jews are guilty of crimes against the Latvian people," he said.

He noted that the fascist organization Perkoncruss — or The Cross of Perkun, a Latvian pagan deity — published a book "The Gruesome Year" about the participation of Jews in anti-Latvian crimes during Stalin's regime.

Because some Jews served in the Soviet secret police in Stalinist times, Latvia's nationalists have frequently scapegoated Jews, charging them with taking part in Soviet atrocities against the Latvian people when Russia occupied the country between 1940 and 1941.

To these nationalists, Kalejs is nothing less than a national hero for fighting alongside with Nazis, who overran Latvia in 1941, against Communist domination.

During last week's conference, the nationalist newspaper "Latvians in Latvia" published an article headlined "Hands Off Kalejs." □

(JTA correspondent Lev Gorodetsky in Moscow contributed to this report.)

Israel softens rhetoric on Lebanon after foreign minister's fiery speech

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel's foreign minister is toning down his rhetoric after he had threatened to wreak blood vengeance on Lebanon if Hezbollah launches attacks on northern Israel.

David Levy said Thursday that Israel would strike back forcefully if its civilians were attacked from Lebanon, but there is no standing policy to launch attacks on civilian targets.

Trying to take the heat off controversial remarks made in the Knesset a day earlier, Levy told Israel Radio that his declaration that Israel would respond "blood for blood" and "child for child" if residents of northern Israel came under Hezbollah attack was intended to convey the gravity of the security situation and send a strong message to Syria to rein in Hezbollah.

His Knesset remarks generated volleys of sharp criticism from Syria and Lebanon, where news reports said Levy's speech proves that Israel has "racist" intentions that rival those of the Nazis. Israel's northern border has been relatively quiet following a recent escalation in which seven Israeli soldiers were killed in Hezbollah attacks. Israel retaliated, bombing Lebanese power stations.

During the escalation earlier this month, Levy vowed a scorched-earth policy in Lebanon if Hezbollah decided to retaliate with Katyusha rockets, but those attacks did not materialize.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Ehud Barak also sought to smooth over his foreign minister's Knesset speech.

Speaking to reporters at a joint news conference with visiting French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, Barak said Levy's remarks were intended to convey his concern over security, and in no way hinted that Israel intends to hurt Lebanese civilians.

Barak has pledged to withdraw Israeli troops from southern Lebanon by July, with or without an accompanying peace accord with Syria. □

JEWISH WORLD

Technology transfer bill passes

The leading pro-Israel lobby in the United States applauded the Senate for unanimously passing a bill that singles out Russia for possible sanctions if it supplies Iran with weapons of mass destruction.

Thursday's Senate vote "clearly demonstrates that Congress understands the serious dangers posed to both Israel and the U.S. by the unchecked flow of technology transfers," the American Israel Public Affairs Committee said in a statement.

Group charged with funding ploy

A leader of the American affiliate of Israel's Red Cross Society is charging that the American Jewish Committee is using his group's campaign for international recognition as a fund-raising ploy.

Gary Kenzer, executive director of the Magen David Adom Midwest Region, told the Atlanta Jewish Times his organization is losing potential funding after the AJCommittee took up the issue of having the International Red Cross recognize Magen David Adom.

AJCommittee officials say they are campaigning for the cause not to make money for themselves but to use their clout to resolve an issue that has dragged on for half a century.

Pope arrives in Egypt

Pope John Paul II arrived in Egypt for the first of his millennium year pilgrimages to biblical sites.

On Saturday the pope is scheduled to visit a nearly 1,500-year-old Greek Orthodox monastery at the foot of Mount Sinai, which lies 150 miles southeast of Cairo.

Next month he plans to visit Bethlehem, Nazareth, Jerusalem and other biblical sites in Israel, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority.

German insurer loses battle

A California judge ruled that state officials can punish German reinsurer Munich Re if the company does not comply with the state's request for information about Holocaust-era policies and policyholders.

The judge warned Wednesday that the firm's failure to allow investigators to look at hundreds of possible Holocaust-era claims could mean that the company's U.S. affiliates will lose their licenses to do business in the state.

In a related development, about 200 Holocaust survivors have been paid an average of \$10,000 under a fast track process for settling Holocaust-era insurance claims.

The World Jewish Congress praised a group of five European insurers for paying a total of about \$2 million, but criticized the firms for rejecting several hundred claims without providing reasons for their decisions.

Orthodox prenuptials would save couples from future grief, rabbis say

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK (JTA) — A group of influential Orthodox rabbis has thrown its weight behind prenuptial agreements in an effort to persuade more young couples to sign such documents before they marry.

Eleven roshei yeshiva, or senior professors of Talmud, at the rabbinical school of Yeshiva University, have signed on to a statement urging greater use of pre-marriage agreements as "a critical step in purging our community of the distressful problem of the modern-day Agunah," or a woman "chained" to a dead marriage by a husband who refuses to give her a religious divorce.

The prenuptial agreement, widely endorsed by centrist Orthodox authorities in 1994, commits a husband and wife to seek arbitration from a Beit Din, or religious court, or in the event that they want to dissolve their marriage, and fines the husband a significant amount — usually \$100 — for each day that he refuses to go.

The rising rate of divorce and the growing number of cases in which husbands withhold the get, or Jewish divorce, as a bartering chip sparked the need for the development of the prenuptial agreement.

Now, the rabbis' statement says, there is a need for its wider implementation.

"We are painfully aware of the problems faced by individuals tied to undesired marriages.

"Many of these problems could have been avoided had the couple signed a halachically and legally valid prenuptial agreement at the time of their marriage," they wrote in their statement.

The statement was first developed at a December 1999 conference.

Orthodox feminist leader Blu Greenberg welcomed the statement.

While these Orthodox rabbis haven't publicly articulated the seriousness of the agunah issue before, "maybe in the hope that the problem would go away or because it was an embarrassment, moving this on to the communal leadership agenda is an important step forward," said Greenberg, president of the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance.

The prenuptial agreement is already being widely used, according to Rabbi Robert Hirt, a vice president of the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary at Yeshiva University.

The roshei yeshiva hesitated to endorse the agreement earlier because they weren't sure how it would be accepted and wanted to gauge its public use.

"In halachah there's a rule that an enactment that cannot meet with the acceptance of the community will not necessarily stand," Hirt said.

"With the passage of time, we've seen a receptivity on the part of faculty, parents and young couples, and now there's a desire to accelerate its use."

Members of the Orthodox Rabbinical Council of America were surveyed a couple of years ago, Hirt said, and about 40 percent said that they used the prenuptial agreement.

A small minority of Orthodox rabbis require that it be signed before officiating at a wedding.

Greenberg urged the rabbis to go further in addressing the issue.

"A priority should be to find a halachic way to eliminate the suffering and the injustice," she said. □

Would-be soldiers split on Lebanon

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Half of the Israeli males preparing to enter the army said they want to serve in Lebanon, according to an opinion poll published by the Israeli daily Yediot Achronot.

The Dahaf Institute poll of 401 teen-agers showed 51 percent of Israeli males ages 17 and 18 believe involvement in the conflict with Hezbollah would prove their manhood. □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES**Austrian interns at Holocaust sites strive to present a different picture***By Tom Tugend*

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — Dominik Zotti is a strapping, blond 20-year old from Vienna, the grandson of a German army veteran who guides visitors through the Holocaust exhibit at the Simon Wiesenthal Center.

Reinhard Hanneschlaeger, 24, from northern Austria, works in the computer section of Steven Spielberg's Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation.

Both are acutely aware of the international criticism leveled at the Austrian government's extreme-right Freedom Party and hope to show, less by argument than by example, that there is a different side to their native country. Zotti and Hanneschlaeger are interns in the Gedenkdienst, or commemorative service, program, which sends young Austrian volunteers, mostly in their 20s, to Holocaust-related institutions in the United States, Canada and Europe for 14-month-long assignments.

Gedenkdienst, founded eight years ago by Austrian political scientist Andreas Maislinger, emphasizes that Austria bears a share of the responsibility for Nazi crimes and the Holocaust.

The Austrian government underwrites the program and counts participation as an alternative to the mandatory eight-month military service for young men.

Pointing to the 18-month preparatory course and the 14 months of service, Hanneschlaeger and Zotti reject the idea that the Gedenkdienst offers an easy way out of doing army training.

While abroad, interns get a monthly stipend of \$600 for all living and personal expenses, which doesn't go very far in Los Angeles. They supplement the stipend by parental support or their own savings, while the host institutions get their services for free.

Gedenkdienst gets some 300 to 500 applications a year, but the majority drop out during the preparatory phase and only 1 in 10 get to go abroad.

"It takes a lot of personal and psychological preparation to stay the course," says Zotti, who is Catholic. "It's not the easy way out."

Appraising his motivation, he says, "Somehow, I always had a strong interest in the Holocaust." He says he talked about it with his grandfather, who was in the German army, and learned about it during high school from classes and several visits to the Mauthausen concentration camp.

Zotti, who as a tour guide meets the general public more than Hanneschlaeger, says he enjoys his job and, despite his Germanic appearance and accent, has had no hostile reactions. He has been invited to give talks at high schools and has savored the "unique experience" of a family Shabbat dinner.

Hanneschlaeger's mother is a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses, as is Hanneschlaeger and his four siblings, and he grew up with stories of the Nazi persecutions of his faith.

Of 20,000 to 25,000 Jehovah's Witnesses in Germany, he says, 6,000 to 7,000 were imprisoned, 2,000 to 2,500 were shipped to concentration camps and more than 500 were killed, including 260 executed for refusing military service.

In his work at the Shoah Foundation, Hanneschlaeger is expanding the computer database by entering testimony from

Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals, political prisoners and other victims of Hitler.

Both young men say their most profound experiences here have come through their encounters with Jewish survivors.

"In school we learned about the Holocaust through facts and numbers," says Hanneschlaeger. "But there is a totally different feeling after you talk to the survivors and realize how much they have suffered."

He has also discovered that "there are places near my home which I cherished as a child, and now I learn that the death marches at the end of the war passed along the same spots," he says. "I don't feel guilty, but it makes me sad. Why did the people just look on and didn't do anything?"

His work at the Shoah Foundation has affected Hanneschlaeger so deeply that he plans to dedicate his career to Holocaust education when he returns home.

Both are reluctant to talk about the current political situation in their country, where the far-right Freedom Party, led by Jorg Haider, has entered the government and raised fears of a neo-Nazi revival. Yet the widespread denunciations of their country obviously bother both of them.

"We try to explain to the survivors we meet that the Freedom Party is not a neo-Nazi party, that there won't be a revival of National Socialism," says Hanneschlaeger.

Austrian interns currently in the United States and Canada are also working at the Holocaust Museum in Houston, the Center for Holocaust, Genocide and Peace Studies in Reno, the Florida Holocaust Museum in St. Petersburg and the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Center. □

OBITUARY**Israel mourns Ofra Haza, nation's music ambassador***By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli singer Ofra Haza, whose blend of traditional Yemenite music and pop tunes drew international acclaim, died Feb. 23 at the age of 42.

Haza died of multiple organ failure at Tel Aviv's Tel Hashomer hospital, where she was admitted 13 days earlier, hospital officials said. They said that at Haza's request, they would not disclose why she was hospitalized.

Haza, who was born and grew up in Tel Aviv's poor Hatikva neighborhood, burst onto the world music scene in the 1980s. Considered a goodwill ambassador of Israeli ethnic music abroad, Haza performed at the 1994 ceremony in Oslo at which the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres and Yasser Arafat for the Oslo peace accords.

A Yemenite Jew, Haza was discovered in a theater workshop at age 12. Despite her successes, she never lost touch with her childhood neighborhood — when Haza got married more than two years ago, she threw a wedding party there.

Her friends and admirers had gathered at the hospital during her illness. Following news of her death, fans of the artist and residents of the Hatikva quarter gathered outside her parents' home. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak said in a statement that Haza's voice "made its way into the hearts of many in Israel and throughout the world." □