



Daily News Bulletin

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83rd Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Israel welcomes Geneva meeting

Israel welcomed President Clinton's announcement that he plans to meet Syrian President Hafez Assad on Sunday in Geneva in a bid to restart Israeli-Syrian peace talks.

"We hope that the meeting will lead to a renewal of the negotiations," Prime Minister Ehud Barak's office said, adding that "such talks will take place only if the appropriate conditions are created." [Page 3]

Pope arrives in Jordan

Pope John Paul II arrived in Jordan in the first leg of his Middle East trip.

He traveled directly from the airport to Mount Nebo, where tradition says Moses first saw the Promised Land.

Meanwhile, the Israeli Cabinet minister coordinating Pope John Paul II's visit to Israel this week said that at the Vatican's request, the trip would not be used for political purposes.

Haim Ramon's comments came as Palestinian officials called on the pope to declare the Palestinians' right to establish their capital in Jerusalem during his visit.

Israel releases 15 prisoners

Israel released 15 Palestinian prisoners. Israel said the releases, which took place Sunday and Monday, were a goodwill gesture for the Islamic holiday of Eid al-Adha, or the Feast of the Sacrifice.

Nazi doctor goes on trial

An Austrian neurologist is slated to go on trial this week for complicity in the murders of nine children when he served as a Nazi doctor during World War II.

Heinrich Gross is alleged to have participated in the killings at a clinic in Vienna, where some 700 children, deemed physically or mentally impaired by the Nazis, were put to death. [Page 4]

Veteran Jewish leader buried

Morris Abram, a veteran Jewish leader and renowned advocate for social justice, was buried Sunday in Hyannis, Mass., where the family vacationed in the summer.

Family, friends and prominent Jewish leaders attended the services held at the Cape Cod Synagogue. Abram died March 15 at the age of 81.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Peace talks don't rank high on agenda of Jewish activists

By Howard Lovy

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Israeli and Palestinian negotiators are resuming peace talks here this week and President Clinton has set a meeting with Syria's president, but don't tell the details to Julianne Berkon, a campaign associate with the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington.

She'll get too angry.

It's not that she doesn't care about Israel and the Middle East peace process. It's that she cares too much, so much that she would just rather tune the whole thing out, or just skim the headlines.

Berkon hates the idea of Israel giving up land for peace, doesn't believe it should cede one inch of the Golan Heights to Syria, but she also just as firmly believes that unless you live in Israel, you have no right to tell Israelis what they should or should not give up.

So both because of her role as a federation professional — in which she cannot be perceived as taking sides — and as an American Jew, she'll keep silent and leave the future of Israel up to the Israelis.

As 3,000 Jews between the ages of 25 and 45 gathered here this week for the United Jewish Communities' Young Leadership Conference, the handshakes between Israelis and Palestinians set to occur in this same town seemed not to be No. 1 on the list of things to think about.

To be sure, many have strong opinions about the emotional issues of the Golan and the status of Jerusalem.

But some say there is too much for them to do as Jews in their own communities to get too worked up over a land to which they may have spiritual, emotional and historic ties, but is still a foreign nation.

As the Holocaust, Israel's independence and even the 1967 and 1973 wars in Israel fade further into memory, the shift of priorities was perhaps inevitable for this generation — among the most affluent of Jewish generations in history.

How can Israel reclaim these Jews?

By speaking their language, says Sara Selber, 43, co-chair of the conference. And that language has to involve hands-on, "tactile" experiences. Hands-on work is what made this generation successful in the business world, and it can be true in its connection to Israel, she says.

With the connection to Israel not automatic among younger Jews, she says, Israel has to earn their support.

The work of the activists at this conference in helping to resettle distressed Jews from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia is a way for them to see that Israel is more than simply another Mideast nation.

As her co-chair, Louis Price, put it, they can see that the Jewish state is a "light unto nations."

But for New York lawyer Stacy Schneider, 33, there's too much to do in this country to worry about what Israel represents.

She came to the Young Leadership Conference because she is frightened by the religious right, and especially their resurfacing in the presidential campaign, and wants to learn what she can do to keep the line between church and state in America well defined. More real to her than an Arab enemy are those who would impose their

MIDEAST FOCUS

Haredim make effigies of minister

Residents of fervently Orthodox neighborhoods in Jerusalem made effigies of Israel's education minister that they plan to burn during Purim, Israel Radio reported.

The move came after the leader of the fervently Orthodox Party, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, compared Yossi Sarid to Haman, the figure from the Book of Esther who seeks the destruction of the Jewish people.

'Last' troops move into Lebanon

Israeli soldiers expected to be the last Israeli troops to serve in southern Lebanon before the promised pullback in July took up their positions.

The soldiers replaced paratroop units that had been manning the security zone outposts.

Iran ignores U.S. overture

Iran ignored a call U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright issued last week for the United States and Iran to end more than two decades of hostility.

In his address to the nation to mark the Iranian new year Monday, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei did not mention the United States.

Swiss to try Mossad agent

An Israeli agent caught in a bungled 1998 spying operation will go on trial in Switzerland in July, according to Swiss officials.

The agent, identified by the court as Isaac Bental, was one of five Mossad agents caught trying to install bugging equipment in an apartment building. The others were released after questioning.

Jewish star won't go with pope

Israel's High Court of Justice ruled that the Star of David will be removed from the ambulance that accompanies Pope John Paul II during his visit to Israel. The court accepted the state's explanation that this would be in keeping with Vatican policy.

religious will on her in the United States. It's a fear that was reinforced for her when she encountered religious ignorance and anti-Semitism among her peers in a Savannah, Ga., newsroom, where she once worked as a TV news reporter.

As for Israel, she feels a connection mostly when there is a tragedy — when Jews die in a terrorist attack.

During times of peace, she says, she feels removed.

Schneider says what little connection she feels to Israel is media-driven. She says "Bibi" Netanyahu — she calls him by his nickname because she says she feels she knows him — offered her a more human link to Israel when he was prime minister because he was so telegenic.

Despite the abundance here of people like Schneider, there are also a passionate core who do think and breathe Israeli politics and get emotional over the peace process.

They were evident in well-attended conference sessions on Israeli life, the religious-secular debate in Israel and, in one packed conference room, a seminar called "On a Clear Day You Can See Damascus."

Panelist Daniel Pipes, director of the Middle East Forum, a think tank, told the group that they have every right to insist that their voices be heard in Israeli politics.

"American Jews are far more hard-headed about this than Israelis," who are fatigued after decades of endless hostilities, Pipes said.

Israelis just want to start their "dot-com companies" and get on with being a normal nation, he said, while American Jews can't understand why Israelis would want to hand over land without getting much in return.

Among those who feels they have a personal stake in the Middle East is Steven Kaplan, 31, a New York accountant, who follows the peace process closely and is a news addict when it comes to Israeli current events.

But Kaplan says he's an exception. Most of his Jewish peers are "either indifferent or ignorant" when it comes to Israel because they simply can't relate.

"Their ties to Judaism are tenuous at best," Kaplan says, and so are their ties to Israel.

Kaplan's commitment has been reinforced over the years through trips to Israel. That's why he thinks Birthright Israel — a program launched by Jewish philanthropists to provide young Jews with a free trip to Israel — is basically a good way to help cement ties to Judaism, although he adds with a grin: "I think there are a lot of young, rich Jewish kids getting away with murder."

Mindy Binderman, 33, never thought she would be among the young Jews who needed to be reminded of a connection to the Jewish state.

Binderman, of Baltimore, grew up a Zionist, but lately feels "very disconnected." The reason? Her priorities have changed, she says.

She's a new mom and "day school issues are more timely than what's going on in Syria."

She was attending UJC sessions about Israel to force herself to get connected again.

But nothing can force an interest in the Middle East for Matt Steinberg, 29, of Philadelphia.

"I'm the wrong person to ask that question," he said, when asked whether he follows the Mideast peace process.

"I don't have a high interest in politics, Mideast or otherwise, and I don't read the papers."

Then why is he going to Israel this summer as part of Partnership 2000, a program that promotes business ties between Israel and the Diaspora? And why is he involved in his local federation?

"It's important for Jews to stick together," Steinberg says.

But even among those whose focus is their local Jewish communities, there was still evidence that Israel is an attraction at least on an emotional level. Many, for example, knew the words to Hatikvah at the opening ceremonies.

And many were rolling in the aisles when, on Saturday night, a member of the political satire troupe the Capitol Steps walked out on stage dressed as Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat, did a double take at the sea of Jewish faces and said, "Boy, did I pick the wrong crowd." □

(JTA Washington correspondent Sharon Samber contributed to this report.)



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JEWISH WORLD

U.S. downplays expectations from Clinton meeting with Assad

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — U.S. officials are downplaying expectations that a planned meeting between President Clinton and Syrian President Hafez Assad will spell the quick resumption of Israeli-Syrian negotiations.

Indeed, Clinton himself played down the possibility when he announced Monday that he plans to meet Assad in Geneva on Sunday.

"I don't want to unduly raise expectations, but I think that this is an appropriate thing for me to do" in order to get the Israeli-Syrian talks "back on track," Clinton said during a news conference in Bangladesh.

Clinton's national security adviser, Sandy Berger, echoed this sentiment, telling reporters, "I don't expect an instant result from this meeting.

"You can't move this thing forward without a face-to-face meeting with Assad," said Berger.

Asked about reports that Assad is unwell, Berger said, "He's been engaged in all of this, calling the shots."

Berger added that the president is "not taking a specific American proposal" to Geneva. The meeting is scheduled to take place on Clinton's way home from a six-day tour of South Asia.

Israel cautiously welcomed word of the meeting.

"We hope that the meeting will lead to a renewal of the negotiations," Prime Minister Ehud Barak's office said, but added that "such talks will take place only if the appropriate conditions are created."

Barak's office said the prime minister was in continuous contact with Clinton and that he is closely following American efforts to revive the Israeli-Syrian negotiations.

Those talks broke off in January amid Syrian demands that Israel commit itself to a full withdrawal from the Golan Heights as part of a peace deal with Damascus.

Israeli officials refused such assurances and first sought to address the issues of security and normalization, saying these discussions would help determine the scope of the withdrawal.

Israeli media reports have said in recent weeks that Barak might be willing to concede most of the Golan — close to, but not including, the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Since the Israeli-Syrian talks broke off, Israel has denied any direct contacts with Damascus and said it had no information when the discussions might resume. □

Latvian veterans march through Riga

MOSCOW (JTA) — For many Latvians, the march by SS veterans through Latvia's capital was a procession of old soldiers commemorating their struggle against communism.

But for Latvia's Jewish and Russian populations, many of whom are not Latvian citizens, the annual march through Riga was a glorification of Latvia's support of fascism during World War II.

The 140,000-strong Latvian Legion, which was a division of the Nazi SS, was formed in 1943 under a directive issued by Hitler. For many Latvians, the legion is considered heroic because its soldiers fought against the Soviet forces that overran the country at the beginning of the war. It was later crushed by the Red Army in 1944.

The SS and its ethnic Latvian allies virtually wiped out the 70,000-strong prewar Latvian Jewish community. There are now about 15,000 Jews currently living in the Baltic nation.

"I saw people who could have been my murderers," said Effraim Meydan, who works at the Riga office of the Jewish Agency for Israel.

Nikolajs Romanovskis, chairman of the National Soldiers Association, which organized the March 16 event, viewed the demonstration differently.

Only a small number of soldiers were involved in the murders, he said. "To say that many of us were involved in shooting Jews is nonsense." □

Lawmaker grilled on Jesus

A Jewish state legislator from Kentucky was questioned about her religious beliefs during discussion about a bill that would allow the Ten Commandments to be posted in classrooms and public property. State Rep. Kathy Stein responded to questions about Jesus by saying "the Jewish faith does not believe he was the messiah." The bill, which the House passed by a vote of 77-17, now goes to the state Senate.

High-tech firms form alliance

American and Israeli high-tech companies formed an alliance to boost cooperation and trade between firms in the two countries. The privately funded U.S.-Israel Business Exchange hopes to facilitate high-tech partnerships with the help of an Internet site where investors can learn about new products. The site is expected to be up in June.

Group offers Judaism, activism

An organization that offers civics and leadership training for Jewish teens from around the United States is offering a semester in Washington.

Together with the American University, the Washington Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values is recruiting 30 college students for "Judaism, Advocacy and Social Change," in which participants will divide their time between internships and academic course work addressing Jewish values and social activism.

Survivor to serve in World Court

An Auschwitz survivor was recently elected to be a judge on the U.N. World Court.

Thomas Buergenthal, a professor of law at George Washington University and a member of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council, lived in a Polish ghetto before he was sent to Auschwitz in 1944.

The court is the U.N.'s top legal authority.

Christian center created in Israel

The Hebrew University established what is believed to be the first Christian study center at an Israeli university. Research at the Center for the Study of Christianity, established with a grant from a Christian family from Belgium, will emphasize the role of Christianity in the Holy Land and the historical relationship between Christianity and Judaism.

Klezmer musician dies at 87

Max Epstein, a member of one of America's leading klezmer families, died Saturday at 87. Along with his three brothers, Epstein played the music of Eastern European Jews for more than 50 years. The 1996 documentary "A Tickle in the Heart," which told the history of klezmer music in the United States, focused on their lives.

Austria tries 'Grim Reaper' doctor for Nazi-era euthanasia of children

By Douglas Davis

LONDON (JTA) — A prominent Austrian neurologist was slated to go on trial this week for complicity in the murders of nine children when he served as a Nazi doctor during World War II.

Heinrich Gross is alleged to have participated in the killings at the Am Spiegelgrund Children's Clinic in Vienna, where some 700 children deemed physically or mentally impaired by the Nazis were put to death as part of Hitler's "euthanasia" program.

Gross, 84, is the first war crimes suspect to be charged in Austria since 1975.

This week's trial is not the first for Gross, who became known to the clinic's inmates as "The Scythe" — a reference to the Grim Reaper.

In 1950 Gross was tried and convicted on a single count of manslaughter and sentenced to two years in jail.

But the following year, the verdict and sentence were overturned by the Supreme Court, which ordered a retrial.

By that time, however, Austrian officials had decided it was time to bury their country's Nazi past.

They quietly dropped the case and Gross was allowed to resume his medical career.

In subsequent decades, Austrians were slow to own up to their Nazi past, preferring to portray themselves as helpless victims of Hitler rather than collaborators.

As the years wore on, Gross, still practicing in the same clinic, won a reputation as one of Austria's most eminent neurologists.

In recognition of his work, he was presented with his own institute, where he continued conducting research on the brains of children who had perished at the clinic during the war.

But four years ago, Austrian prosecutors reopened the Gross case after fresh evidence became available to the Justice Ministry.

In February 1998, Austrian police swooped down on Gross' institute, where they seized thousands of papers, as well as the brains of 400 children from the doctor's "private collection."

For the past 14 months, Austrian prosecutors weighed the evidence, attempting to determine whether it was sufficient and whether the aging neurologist was fit to stand trial.

Despite vigorous opposition from Gross' lawyers, the prosecutors decided to proceed with the case, which was scheduled to start Tuesday.

During the course of the trial, survivors are expected to testify to experiments that were conducted at the clinic.

They will tell that they were wrapped in sheets soaked in freezing water and subjected to paralyzing injections that caused nausea and vomiting.

In an interview last year, Gross insisted that he remembered little of his wartime experiences, although he did recall that windows were left open to study the effect of cold weather on the children.

He also admitted referring children to the Nazi euthanasia board. But he flatly denied that he himself had ever killed anyone.

This is not the view of the witnesses, among whom will be Johann Gross, a survivor of the clinic.

Johann Gross, now a 69-year-old retired painter and decorator, lives alone in a small flat in Vienna on a minimum pension.

He is not, he says, seeking revenge. Nor does he particularly want the doctor to be jailed. But he does want Gross to be stripped of the wealth he accumulated since the war and he does want to see justice done.

He also says he wants the "chance to face him across the courtroom and ask him if he sleeps well at night."

Johann Gross' mother abandoned him when he was a baby.

He was left in the care of his father, an invalid and an alcoholic.

As a young boy, he dressed in the uniform of the Nazi youth movement and went out to collect money for the Nazi troops.

He landed in trouble, however, when, at the age of 9, he decided to give some of the money he had raised to a woman who had once looked after him.

The boy was caught, handed over to Nazi officials and branded "anti-social."

In 1940, as a punishment, he was sent to a Nazi children's home and the following year, after repeatedly trying to escape, he was sent to Am Spiegelgrund, one of 30 Nazi euthanasia clinics for the "disabled."

Among the first people he encountered at the clinic, he says, was Heinrich Gross, who examined him and measured his shaven head.

Continued escape attempts landed the young Gross in the clinic's punishment wing, where he now says he was regularly injected by the experimenting Nazi doctor.

Some of the injections made him sick for weeks. Once the substance took effect, he now recalls, it was "like a hard blow in the stomach."

Then the nausea started, and he remembers thinking, "This is what dying is like. I was convinced that I'd been injected with a deadly poison."

On another occasion, he was given a yellow fluid — what he describes as "the sulphur treatment" — that left him unable to walk and in great pain for two weeks.

But it is the memory of children's bodies piled up in wagons that continues to haunt Johann Gross.

He remembers seeing the cadavers "lying all over each other, like dolls that had been thrown away, with their limbs in unnatural positions. Most of their bodies had a strange green-blue color."

And he remembers the nurses warning the young survivors that such would be their fate, too, if they misbehaved.

Drugs that precipitated attacks of pneumonia accelerated the deaths of many of the clinic's 700 young victims.

The illness would be left untreated and the resulting deaths would be invariably attributed to "natural causes."

Dr. Ernst Illing, the clinic's head, was executed for his part in the killings immediately after the war. Marianne Tuerk, another doctor, was jailed for 10 years.

Now, 40 years after his first trial, Heinrich Gross will face the retrial that Austria's Supreme Court demanded nearly a half-century ago.

"For decades, the victims of Spiegelgrund have kept quiet and did not dare go public with their stories," says Wolfgang Neugebauer, a historian of modern Austria.

"After being branded 'anti-social' and 'prone to crime' by the Nazis, they were also discriminated against after 1945 and had to watch how former Nazis made careers for themselves in postwar Austria." □