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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Putin announces Jewish hero

Russian President Vladimir Putin announced he would nominate a Russian Jewish community leader stabbed in a Moscow synagogue last July to become a hero of the state.

Word of Putin's plan to honor Leopold Kaimovsky came during an annual Jewish choral competition in Russia's capital and one day after Putin was elected president with 52 percent of the vote.

Western leaders said Putin will bring a firm hand to the Russian presidency and greater stability to the country.

They also expressed hope that Putin would steer the nation toward greater democracy, although Putin has been vague about his plans for political and economic reforms. [Page 1]

Barak alters peace priorities

U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross flew to Israel to brief officials about the failed summit between President Clinton and Syrian President Hafez Assad.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak is meanwhile shifting his attention from the Syrian track to Israel's planned withdrawal from Lebanon and the final-status talks with the Palestinians, according to Cabinet member Haim Ramon.

Meanwhile, Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy said the failure of Sunday's summit proves that Assad still expects Israel to meet all his demands before peace talks even begin.

Levy added that Assad has yet to realize the meaning of peace, and thinks the Israeli government is so eager for an agreement it is willing to sacrifice its security.

Munich Games film wins Oscar

A film exploring the murder of 11 Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympic Games won the Oscar for best documentary at the Academy Awards.

"One Day in September" was narrated by actor Michael Douglas.

But two other films with Jewish themes that were nominated for Oscars — "Solomon and Gaenor," a Jewish "Romeo and Juliet" set in Wales that was nominated for best foreign film; and "Eyewitness," which featured eyewitness paintings of life in Auschwitz and was nominated for best documentary short subject — did not win.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Russian Jews wonder which Putin won the vote: reformer or iron ruler?

By Lev Gorodetsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — Just days before the Russian presidential election, the country's state-controlled television channel ran an ad claiming one of the presidential contenders was controlled by Jews, foreigners and gays.

The attack ad on the ORT channel against Grigory Yavlinsky, who has Jewish roots, came as something of a surprise because Russian President Vladimir Putin, who won Sunday's election with 52 percent of the vote, had not played a strong nationalist card during the campaign.

If anything, it was the campaign of Putin's main rival, Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov, that had been tainted from the start with Russian nationalism, and sometimes open anti-Semitism.

A typical ad for the election — which came amid ongoing concerns over anti-Semitic incidents and economic downturn, resulting in increased Jewish immigration to Israel during the last few years — ran: "What is the secret of Zyuganov? He is kind and honest — a genuine Russian," implying that people like Yavlinsky are not.

But looked at in another light, the sudden appearance of the ad, which Putin's team has denied any prior knowledge of, is not surprising at all.

There have been at least two Putins so far: the man who after being designated heir apparent by Russian President Boris Yeltsin promised President Clinton and British Prime Minister Tony Blair that he would pursue free market reforms and human rights; and the former KGB officer who has pursued the war in Chechnya with a vengeance and not permitted journalists the freedoms to cover either that bloody war against Muslim separatists or the campaign itself.

"I've been joking that it's not clear which Putin is going to win the election," said Carol Saivetz, a research associate at the Davis Center of Russian Studies at Harvard University. "He's been purposefully vague about what his plans are for the future."

This vagueness allowed Jewish voters, like their fellow Russians, to project onto Putin whatever they themselves want.

- A 36-year-old businessman from Moscow expects stabilization and further liberalization of the economy;
- A 45-year-old university professor from St. Petersburg wants Putin to provide state support to the sciences;
- A 55-year-old retired soldier from the city of Samara on the Volga River wants support for the army;
- A family of Mountain Jews, fleeing the instability in Dagestan, wants Putin to finally wipe out the rebels in Chechnya and stop the ethnic conflicts.
- A middle-aged activist from the Siberian city of Tomsk wants Putin to support Israel in the Middle East peace process.
- A university student from Moscow wants him to crack down on the anti-Semitism and crime in Russia.

All share a desire to see stability, a leader who will restore order and authority of the state and crack down on the "thieves and oligarchs," even at the expense of some democracy. Exactly how this will translate in the coming months is unknown. Will Putin pursue free market reforms and crack down on anti-Semitism or will he become an authoritarian leader who allows free market reforms but limits individual freedoms and pays scant attention to human rights? Will Putin, as he did in the Parliament, form an

MIDEAST FOCUS

Shas leader faces police probe

Israel's attorney general instructed police to investigate the spiritual leader of the fervently Orthodox Shas Party for allegedly inciting violence in remarks made against Education Minister Yossi Sarid.

Shas leaders claim the probe is racially motivated against the mostly Sephardi party.

Israel warned on pullback

A unilateral Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon could lead to an escalation of tensions in the region, said a British author who is a confidant of Syrian President Hafez Assad. "If Israel feels compelled to make a unilateral withdrawal, I think that could well be the first step toward a confrontation between Israel and Syria," Patrick Seale told Israel's Army Radio.

Barak orders construction freeze

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak ordered a freeze on construction in a West Bank Jewish settlement. After the decision regarding Har Gilo, one of Barak's coalition partners, the pro-settler National Religious Party, said it was considering supporting a no-confidence motion against the prime minister.

Soldier faces extradition

A state prosecutor asked an Israeli court to allow the extradition to Canada of an Israeli soldier accused of the beating death of a teen-ager in Toronto. Daniel Weiz, 19, is charged with killing Dimitri Baranovski last November in a fight over money and cigarettes.

Hoops fans hurt in rush for tix

Twelve people were injured in a rush for basketball tickets outside the Yad Elishu Stadium in Tel Aviv. The incident occurred when police on horseback dispersed thousands of fans stampeding the box office.

Thousands of fans had lined up overnight to get tickets to a critical match between Maccabi Tel Aviv and PAF Bologna this week.



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alliance with the Communists and their leader, Zyuganov, who received roughly 30 percent of the vote — slightly less than he did in 1996? Or will he rely on reformers who backed him in the election, such as former Prime Minister Sergei Kiriyenko?

Putin gave a positive indication for Jews on Monday, when he sent word to an annual Jewish choral competition in Moscow that he would nominate the director of Moscow's Jewish Art Center to become a hero of the state. Leopold Kaimovsky, who was stabbed in a Moscow synagogue in July, was given a standing ovation.

But all of the answers to these questions are still unknown, and will be answered only in the coming weeks. Putin is not expected to announce his government until May, when he is also expected to receive an economic report from a think tank that he helped establish.

The pre-election anti-Semitic ad that captured international headlines demonstrates that there may be two Putins regarding Jewish issues as well.

Since Yeltsin plucked Putin from obscurity and made him his prime minister in August 1999 — and then acting president when he resigned on Dec. 31 — Putin has often stated his willingness to combat anti-Semitism and xenophobia.

In November he met with the leaders of the umbrella Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia. More recently he pledged to combat the scourge of anti-Semitism in a response to a letter of concern from U.S. legislators.

Even though it was clear from polls that Yavlinsky, who garnered less than 6 percent, had no chance of winning the election, the ad was vicious.

Yavlinsky was accused of having spent 10 times as much money on his election campaign as was legally permitted. It was further alleged that he had illegally received this extra money from abroad and from the Jewish media tycoon Vladimir Goussinsky, who heads the umbrella Russian Jewish Congress.

The ad mentioned that Goussinsky is an Israeli citizen and, clearly meaning to stress his Jewish and Israeli connection, showed footage of Yavlinsky sitting among kippah-wearing Jews.

It is believed that Yavlinsky, in fact, captured the bulk of the Jewish vote in Moscow and St. Petersburg. In provincial cities it is estimated that Jews voted for Putin in more and less the same percentage as the general population.

The main reason for Jewish support of Yavlinsky in St. Petersburg and Moscow, Russia's two largest cities, is that his democratic, pro-Western outlook reflects their views as members of Russia's traditional intelligentsia.

"I voted for Yavlinsky, because he is the only one who has a human face over there," said Vera Eisenstadt, a Moscow retiree.

Meanwhile, the ad has Russian and American Jewish leaders worried — and calling on Putin to repudiate it.

Pinchas Goldschmidt, Moscow's chief rabbi, called the attack on Yavlinsky "an act of state anti-Semitism" and said that if "Putin doesn't want to be accused of anti-Semitism, he should publicly repudiate these acts."

The Washington-based NCSJ: Advocates on Behalf of Jews in Russia, Ukraine, the Baltic States & Eurasia said in a statement that the ad "perpetrated the worst stereotypes against Russian Jews."

The group, which has been monitoring anti-Semitism in the former Soviet Union, is preparing a congratulatory letter for Putin's victory, but would express their "surprise" and "concern" over the ad.

"We want, and the Russian Jews need, a strong and clear message from President Putin that these types of messages have no validity in his government," said Mark Levin, the group's executive director.

So the world is holding its breath — and waiting.

Saivetz of Harvard is slightly pessimistic, at least on Jewish issues. She's particularly worried that once the Chechen war has run its course, Jews could again become the scapegoats.

"Should somebody down the road decide to run a populist campaign, the Jews are the most likely targets. If somebody wants to find blame for what has happened" in Russia economically and politically during "the last few years, the Jews are the most likely targets." □

(JTA Staff Writer Peter Ephross in New York contributed to this report.)

JEWISH WORLD

Russian officials arrest Iraqi

Russia arrested an Iraqi national who may be a member of a group active in a wave of brutal kidnappings, whose targets include Jews, in war-torn Chechnya.

Russian security officials say Abd el-Aziz Muhammad Abd el-Wahabb, believed to be a member of the Saudi-based Islamic Wahabbites, may have helped funnel money to Chechen rebels.

Looted work may prompt lawsuit

The Seattle Art Museum can sue a New York art gallery for the market value of a 1928 painting that the museum had to return to its pre-World War II owners, a U.S. judge ruled.

Last year the museum returned Henri Matisse's "Odalisque" to the heirs of Paul Rosenberg, a French Jewish art dealer whose collection had been looted by the Nazis.

German insurers will pay

German insurers will pay a minimum of \$270 million to cover Holocaust-era policies, according to Germany's top negotiator for the country's new \$5 billion compensation fund.

The letter by Otto Lambsdorff, which was reported by Reuters, says German insurers will pay for policies they sold throughout Eastern Europe, not just within Germany.

Shabbat program planned

More than 700 synagogues and 54 campus Hillels are expected to participate Friday night in Shabbat Across America/Canada.

The program is sponsored by the New York-based National Jewish Outreach Program, which has sponsored similar events since 1987 with the goal of increasing observance among unaffiliated Jews.

Pope novel mirrors life

A new novel depicts a dying pope who apologizes for the Catholic Church's historical sins, including anti-Semitism.

The release of David Shapiro's "The Promise of God" came soon after Pope John Paul II made just such an apology.

Spell-checker needs fix

The head of Microsoft's European and Middle East operations said the firm is fixing a bug in its Windows 2000 French-language spell-checker that suggests replacing "anti-stress" with the word "anti-Arab."

Michel Lacombe said the problem should be fixed in a few weeks and that customers would be offered a new version free of charge.

FOCUS ON ISSUES

NRA is shooting itself in the foot by pumping up rhetoric, groups say

By Sharon Samber

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The National Rifle Association says the president's lax enforcement of gun laws has killed people, and a senator accuses the NRA of cheapening the memory of the Holocaust.

In recent weeks, the back-and-forth rhetoric between pro-gun control and anti-gun control forces has escalated.

Many Jewish groups say that while the barbs may obscure the work they're doing toward getting tougher gun control laws passed, it's important that the rhetoric not be ignored. They say the rhetoric shows that the NRA is not in the mainstream and, according to one Jewish activist, exposes the group as extremist.

Wayne LaPierre, the NRA's executive vice president, said President Clinton is willing to accept a certain level of killing to further his political agenda, and said the president is responsible for the shooting death last summer of college basketball coach Ricky Byrdsong at the hands of a white supremacist because federal gun laws are not being enforced.

Congressional Republicans have distanced themselves from LaPierre's remarks and Jewish groups have denounced the NRA, but the headlines have already been made.

Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Reform movement's Union of American Hebrew Congregations, wrote to NRA President Charlton Heston and LaPierre, urging them to stop the "disruptive rhetoric of blame."

Mark Pelavin, the associate director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, said it is unfortunate that the political landscape has not yet changed enough to move gun control legislation forward.

"I'm not sure what it takes to get gun control to be issue number one," he said. People are not making the connection between the tragic school shootings during the past few years and the need for better gun safety legislation, Pelavin noted.

Many legislative proposals related to gun control are stymied. The juvenile justice bill, for example, which includes provisions such as safety locks for handguns, background checks at gun shows and a ban on large ammunition clips, has not been worked on in months.

The bill is stuck in a committee where the House and Senate versions of the bill are hammered out. But the war of words continues. Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.) called on the NRA to remove from its Web site an article that compares gun safety measures proposed by Clinton to Nazi Germany's laws preventing Jews from owning guns.

The article claims "resistance to Nazi oppression was hampered by the lack of civilian arms possession." It makes the case that gun owners "simply disappeared" in Nazi Germany and the organizations that called for gun registration and confiscation contributed nothing to winning the war or stopping the Holocaust.

The NRA denies that the article insults the memory of the Holocaust. "Quite the contrary," said Bill Powers, the director of public affairs. "It helps us to never forget that terrible time in history."

Matthew Dorf, director of the American Jewish Congress' Governmental and Public Affairs Office, believes the rhetoric is an important part of the debate.

"Rhetoric is good," he said. "The gun control movement won the rhetoric war."

Although gun control legislation is moving slowly, other initiatives are under way. Both the Religious Action Center and the AJCongress are endorsing the Million Mom March, a march and rally scheduled to be held in Washington on Mothers' Day, May 14, when mothers will speak out for gun control. The AJCongress is also continuing its "Stop the Guns: Protect Our Kids" campaign to send 1 million signatures to Congress demanding strict firearms laws.

A recent agreement signed between the Clinton administration and Smith & Wesson emboldened many gun control advocates.

The gun manufacturer says it will provide locking devices and a code of conduct for the sales and distribution of handguns. □

NEWS ANALYSIS

Papal visit sent message of Jewish-Catholic healing

By Avi Machlis

JERUSALEM (JTA) — For Jews around the world, even skeptics of Catholic-Jewish reconciliation, it was hard not to be moved by two historic moments during Pope John Paul II's pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

The first was the sight of the 79-year-old pope staring silently into the eternal flame at the Yad Vashem memorial hall during a ceremony last week honoring victims of the Holocaust.

While many had hoped that he would offer an apology for the church's silence in the face of the Nazi slaughter, the sight of the leader of the Roman Catholic Church at the somber memorial ceremony moved many to tears. The second moment came Sunday, when the pope stood again in silence, this time in front of the Western Wall, Judaism's holiest site.

He quietly read a prayer of reconciliation, requesting forgiveness from the God of Abraham for the church's sins against Jews through the centuries, then slipped it into a crevice of the Wall, as Jews have done for centuries. After instinctively blessing the note with the sign of the cross, the ailing pope returned to touch the stones again, his hand trembling, his eyes closed in contemplation.

Given the centuries of Christian persecution of Jews, many were struck by the image of the leader of 1 billion Roman Catholics, dressed in flowing white robe and golden crucifix, asking forgiveness from the God of Abraham at the site Jews yearned for during 2,000 years of exile.

"I was very moved," Rabbi Michael Melchior, Israel's minister for Israeli society and world Jewish communities, told JTA after escorting the pope at the Wall. "It was something beyond history. Not only did the pope touch the Western Wall, but the Wall reached out and touched him and all of us."

When John Paul left the region Sunday, Israeli officials responsible for the trip breathed a collective sigh of relief. The incredibly sensitive visit passed without any political blunders.

"Operation Old Friend," perhaps the most complicated security operation ever mounted for a visitor to Israel, had been implemented to near perfection.

Many Israelis felt they had made a new friend in John Paul. Israel's leading Hebrew newspapers took an overwhelmingly positive view of the papal journey as a tangible sign of the dramatic changes in Jewish-Catholic relations in the years since Cardinal Karol Wojtyla ascended to the papacy in 1978 and took the name John Paul II. Yediot Achronot, the most popular daily, devoted a two-page centerfold to a photo of the pope at the Wall.

Prime Minister Ehud Barak said the pope's visit to the Wall and Yad Vashem "will remain engraved in the consciousness of the entire world as a most important step toward historic reconciliation between the Christian world and Judaism."

"I am sure that there will be more problems in our contacts with the Catholic Church, but this visit will make dealing with those differences and disputes much more comfortable from a diplomatic and international perspective," Barak said.

As the pope departed Sunday night on an El Al 747 with the name "Jerusalem" on its nose, interfaith activists realized his would be a hard act to follow.

"We have come very far, but that does not mean there is still not a long way to go," said Melchior, who announced during the Western Wall visit his intention to launch a new interfaith dialogue forum. "I know that there are more and more Christians and people in the Catholic Church, as well as Muslim leaders, who want to join in a different kind of dialogue."

This, however, was not clearly evident from the pope's visit.

Before visiting the Western Wall, John Paul toured the Temple Mount, which houses the Al-Aksa Mosque, Islam's third holiest shrine. There he heard Palestinian grievances about Israel's behavior toward them in eastern Jerusalem since the Jewish state took control of the entire city in the 1967 Six-Day War.

He also met the grand mufti of Jerusalem, whose inflammatory comments published that day accused the Jews of exaggerating the Holocaust to win world sympathy. The pope's spokesman said John Paul was unaware of those remarks.

Earlier during the trip, the mufti refused to attend a Jewish-Christian-Islamic summit. An Islamic representative stormed out of last week's meeting after lashing out at Israeli policy toward Palestinians in Jerusalem. As he listened to competing Jewish and Islamic claims to Jerusalem, the pope held his head in his hands.

Throughout his pilgrimage, John Paul skillfully traversed the religious and political chasms that sever the Holy City. He kept himself above attempts from both sides to politicize the visit, and he issued universal calls for peace wherever he set foot.

Yet as the pope left Israel in the twilight of his papacy, it remained unclear whether the deep personal commitment to reconciliation with the Jewish people would continue under his successor. The Polish-born pope was personally motivated by witnessing the Holocaust as a young priest during World War II.

"Nevertheless I think he has set down solid foundations for a very healthy relationship between the Catholic Church and the Jewish people," said David Rosen, director of the Anti Defamation League's Israel office and a veteran interfaith activist. "It is impossible today to have a serious position in the Catholic Church and to express an anti-Judaic opinion."

Part of the power of the pope's pilgrimage was that it sent a message of reconciliation to Christians all over the world.

Almost every day during his stay, the Pope conducted a mass, and church harmonies resonated throughout the Holy Land.

It climaxed at Korazim, the site where Christians believe Jesus preached to crowds overlooking the Sea of Galilee.

About 100,000 people attended a service some pundits called the "Catholic Woodstock," cheering the pop-star clergyman with chants of "John Paul II, We Love You." It was a strong sign of the pope's ability to deliver his religious message using modern means.

For Marcel Dubois, a Dominican monk who served on the pontifical council for relations with Judaism for 15 years, it was an overwhelming week. Dubois, a philosophy lecturer at the Hebrew University who has lived in Jerusalem since 1962, felt the visit, and especially the ceremony at Yad Vashem, was a validation of all his own efforts to bridge the Jewish-Christian gulf.

The "ambassadors of resentment," he added, who preferred to focus on issues such as the pope's failure to condemn the silence of Pope Pius XII during the Holocaust, "were proved wrong."

"The pope's personality brings together all of the good things between Christians and Jews," he said. "His pilgrimage was the first meeting between the people of Israel and the heart of the church." □