



# Daily News Bulletin

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83rd Year

## TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

### L.A. rally held for 'Iran 13'

More than 1,000 people rallied Sunday in Los Angeles to demand freedom for the 13 Iranian Jews being tried for spying for Israel and the United States.

The vigil was co-sponsored by the Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles and the Simon Wiesenthal Center, which were joined by 28 other organizations.

### Steinhardt pulls out of Forward

The Forward's largest individual financial supporter is pulling out as an owner of the paper.

The move by Michael Steinhardt, who has invested millions of dollars in the national Jewish weekly, came after editor Seth Lipsky submitted his forced resignation effective May 25.

The hedge-fund-manager-turned-philanthropist said he will still support some of the paper's projects in the Jewish community.

### Irving pursuing another lawsuit

Holocaust denier David Irving is proceeding with a libel action against a London newspaper and a British writer.

But The Observer and journalist Gitta Sereny are asking the courts to nullify Irving's action against them after his defeat last week in the lawsuit he brought against Holocaust scholar Deborah Lipstadt. [Page 1]

### 5 convicted in Maccabiah tragedy

An Israeli court convicted five people in the collapse of a bridge at the Maccabiah Games in 1997 that left four Australian athletes dead and scores of others injured. The offense can carry up to a four-year jail term. [Page 2]

### Report: France returned assets

More than 90 percent of the assets seized from Jews under France's pro-Nazi Vichy regime were returned or reimbursed after the liberation, according to a government panel.

The Matteoli Commission, which issued its report Monday after a three-year investigation, estimated the total value of seized Jewish assets at some \$1.26 billion at current prices.

The World Jewish Congress welcomed the report and said it would work with the French government and local Jewish officials "to seek proper moral and material restitution" of unclaimed assets.

## Irving pursuing another lawsuit, but denier is running low on cash

By Douglas Davis

LONDON (JTA) — Holocaust denier David Irving is proceeding with a libel action against a London Sunday newspaper and a British writer, despite his much-publicized recent defeat in a similar lawsuit.

The Observer and journalist Gitta Sereny are asking the courts to nullify Irving's action against them in light of his defeat last week against Holocaust scholar Deborah Lipstadt.

Irving lost his lawsuit against Lipstadt and her publisher, Penguin Books, with the judge ruling that Irving is an anti-Semitic Holocaust denier and Hitler apologist who distorted historical data to suit his own ideological agenda.

Irving's latest case is based on an article by Sereny, "Spin Time for Hitler," which was published in The Observer on April 21, 1996.

Irving claims the article accuses him of inflating tenfold the death toll in the wartime Allied air raid on Dresden, of obtaining the microfiche plates of the Goebbels diaries in Moscow by subterfuge and of using "invention, omission or distortion to express an obsession."

Irving is claiming damages on the grounds that The Observer failed to publish his reply to the article and that Sereny had pursued a campaign of defamation against him for nearly 20 years. The Observer has already spent some \$1 million preparing its defense against Irving's charges.

Sereny, born in Vienna, achieved international acclaim with her study of Treblinka death camp commandant Franz Stangl, "Into That Darkness," published by Random House in 1983, and her study of Hitler's architect and armaments chief, "Albert Speer: His Battle With Truth," published by Knopf in 1995.

The disgraced Irving, facing bankruptcy from a bill of some \$5 million as a result of his defeat in the Lipstadt trial, is also facing arrest warrants in Germany and the United States. The German warrant, issued by a court in Mannheim, accuses Irving of engaging in Holocaust denial — a criminal offense in Germany — during a speech he made there in 1996.

Also, a California court has issued a warrant for his arrest for failing to repay a \$10,000 loan. The loan, made in 1997 to help Irving publish and reprint four of his books, came from an American supporter, Max Kerstan, a former member of Hitler's army who died that same year.

When Kerstan's widow, Irma, sued to recoup the loan in 1998, Irving told the court that his late benefactor intended to cancel the debt and change his will because his own family did not share his controversial views on Holocaust denial.

Irving lost the case, but he failed to repay the loan or to attend a debtors' court to which he was summoned shortly after the court judgment. He has now been found in contempt and a warrant has been issued for his arrest.

There was more bad news not only for Irving, but also for those supporters who made financial contributions to his libel lawsuit against Lipstadt.

After Irving said he will not be able to pay Lipstadt's costs, her legal team said it will try to recover the funds from his financial supporters.

"Irving will be pursued for every penny of the costs," said a member of the defense team, "and if we don't get the money from him we will go to the judge and ask him to order Irving to divulge the names of his financial backers."

Irving, who defended himself in his lawsuit against Lipstadt, appears to be facing

## MIDEAST FOCUS

### Ross to join next round of talks

U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross will participate in the next round of Israeli-Palestinian talks, according to the U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv.

Ross' presence reflects stepped-up U.S. involvement aimed at securing a breakthrough in the talks, which are scheduled to resume after Passover ends on April 27.

The talks will be held in Israel and the Palestinian self-rule areas, rather than in Washington, the site of the two previous rounds of negotiations.

### Court allows prisoners' release

Israel's Supreme Court refused to block the release of 13 Lebanese prisoners held as bargaining chips for the release of missing and captured servicemen.

After the court rejected a motion by an Israeli group, Victims of Arab Terror, the government said it would free the detainees in the coming days.

The petitioners had argued that freeing the prisoners would deprive Israel of a negotiating card to free the MIAs.

### U.N. panel blasts Israel

The United Nations' leading human rights body criticized Israeli settlement activity and alleged abuses. Only the United States supported Israel when the U.N. Human Rights Commission voted on three anti-Israel resolutions during a meeting Monday in Geneva. Similar resolutions have been submitted annually with the same result.

### Palestinians protest in Bethlehem

Palestinians hurled stones at Israeli soldiers during a demonstration in Bethlehem at which the protesters sought freedom for hundreds of Palestinians held in Israeli jails. Palestinian officials and human rights organizations charge that there are 1,635 Palestinians in Israeli jails.



## Daily News Bulletin

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severe financial difficulties. His main asset, a \$1.5 million apartment in London, is heavily mortgaged, and he is already facing bankruptcy proceedings.

There are also a number of court judgments against him, mostly for relatively small amounts. Irving has claimed to have received backing from more than 4,000 supporters, including 2,000 in the United States, 900 in Britain and 1,200 elsewhere.

He has said that donations to his "fighting fund" have amounted to some \$500,000.

Those donors will now be sought for payment of costs by Lipstadt's lawyers on the grounds that they helped Irving sustain his case against her.

If Irving refuses to divulge the names of his backers, he could face time in a British jail, as he did briefly during another financial dispute in 1994 when he refused to disclose details of his assets. Irving told journalists that he had no doubt that Lipstadt's lawyers "will come for their pound of flesh, but I can assure them I am made of British beef. I know how to fight."

In another development, an Australian official said it is unlikely that Irving will obtain a visa to visit his daughter, who recently became an Australian citizen.

A senior government source told JTA that any application from Irving would be judged on its merits, but added it is "highly unlikely" that the finding in the Lipstadt case "would count in Irving's favor." □

(JTA correspondent Jeremy Jones in Sydney, Australia, contributed to this report.)

## Court holds five responsible for deadly Maccabiah disaster

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — An Israeli court has convicted five people in the collapse of a bridge at the Maccabiah Games in 1997 that left four Australian athletes dead and scores of others injured.

Following a trial that lasted more than two years, at which more than 80 witnesses testified about the disaster at the opening ceremonies of the "Jewish Olympics," a three-judge panel found the five guilty of negligence.

The offense can carry up to a four-year jail term, according to a prosecutor. Sentences will be handed out at a later date.

The five who were convicted Monday were Baruch Karagula and Yehoshua Ben-Ezra, the contractors; Micha Bar-Ilan, the bridge's engineer; Adam Mishori, the head of Irgunit, the firm that subcontracted to Baruch and Karagula; and Yoram Eyal, the head of the organizing committee for the international games.

Two Australian athletes were immediately killed July 14, 1997, and hundreds of other participants at the Games injured when the pedestrian bridge in the Tel Aviv suburb of Ramat Gan collapsed, plunging scores of people into the Yarkon River.

Two more Australians died weeks later as a result of complications linked to contaminants in the river, and dozens of athletes who were injured in the bridge collapse later suffered illnesses.

A week after the collapse, an Israeli commission found that the accident was caused by a chain of failures involving the bridge's planning and construction.

In October 1997, an Australian newspaper that had tests conducted on the river's water concluded that the athletes "fell into a deadly cocktail of chemicals and pollutants" resembling "diluted sewage."

Many of the Australian athletes have filed lawsuits against the Games' organizers, the Maccabi World Union and the builders of the bridge, demanding damages for injuries, mental anguish and loss of income.

Ehud Stein, a lawyer representing the athletes, said Monday's ruling could prove decisive in the civil lawsuits.

Eyal, the head of the organizing committee, sounded a repentant note after the verdict was read.

"The regret and pain of the incident will certainly accompany me and my colleagues in Maccabi until the end of our lives," he said. "We just hope the lessons will be learned and compensation arranged quickly because the suffering of the families is awful." □

## JEWISH WORLD

### Interfaith seder held in Russia

More than 400 people attended a Passover seder in Russia in what is believed to be the first-ever interfaith celebration of Passover there.

Many Muslim and Christian students attended the seder conducted by a Hillel student group in Ufa, the capital of the predominantly Muslim region of Bashkiria.

The Moscow office of the Anti-Defamation League organized the seder.

### Germans discuss slave labor bill

The German Parliament discussed a bill to create a \$5 billion fund to compensate Nazi-era forced and slave laborers.

After last Friday's session, legislators will hold two votes on the bill before it can become law. With widespread support from all parties, the law is expected to go into effect by the summer.

### Ukraine Jews back Kuchma

Ukraine's Jewish voters gave overwhelming support to President Leonid Kuchma's bid to expand his control over Parliament, according to local Jewish officials.

Kuchma won more than 80 percent of the overall vote in Sunday's referendum, according to the nation's Central Election Commission.

### Outreach group expands mission

A national Jewish organization focusing on outreach to the intermarried is expanding its mission from being a "think tank and a research institute to becoming a key provider of program services," according to its newsletter.

Among its plans, the New York-based Jewish Outreach Institute now hopes to launch a "national helpline" for interfaith couples, sponsor Israel trips for such couples and to persuade Jewish institutions to be more inclusive of interfaith families.

### Camp's liberation marked

Delegations from 18 countries visited Germany to mark the 55th anniversary of the liberation of the Sachsenhausen concentration camp.

About half of the camp's 200,000 inmates died during the war.

### Golan hero dead at 74

Israeli reserve Gen. Moshe Peled, a commander in the Israel Defense Force's armored division, died Sunday night after a long illness at the age of 74.

Peled commanded an armored division that held off Syrian troops on the Golan Heights in the 1973 Yom Kippur War.

## Reform vote on gay ceremonies 'not a Jewish move,' Orthodox say

By Julie Wiener

NEW YORK (JTA) — Reform rabbis have "gravely misled not only other Jews, but the entire world by fostering the notion that Judaism tolerates homosexual acts," a fervently Orthodox group is charging.

Agudath Israel of America attacked the Reform movement's acceptance of gay commitment ceremonies in a quarter-page ad on the April 14 New York Times op-ed page. The ad was a response to a March 29 resolution adopted by the Reform movement's Central Conference of American Rabbis, which asserts that "the relationship of a Jewish, same gender couple is worthy of affirmation through appropriate Jewish ritual."

The executive director of the CCAR said he was not surprised or overly concerned by Agudath Israel's advertisement.

"My sense was, before the resolution passed, and now that it's over, that while other groups may disagree and disagree strongly with our stance, that ultimately our friends will remain our friends and our detractors will remain our detractors," said Rabbi Paul Menitoff.

Gays and lesbians and many liberal Jews welcomed the CCAR resolution, which passed overwhelmingly in a voice vote, but is not as strong in its wording as some had originally expected. It does not use the words "marriage" or "wedding" and supports the decision of rabbis who choose not to officiate at same-sex unions, as well as those who do.

Nonetheless, Orthodox leaders have been vociferous in condemning it.

The recent advertisement, which states "Judaism Is Not a Mirror of Society's Shifting Mores" in large writing at the top, goes on to say, "Let it be said loudly and clearly: The Torah, the very basis of the Jewish faith, explicitly considers such acts and relationships deeply sinful, condemns them without qualification and leaves no room for their formal recognition."

Rabbi Avi Shafran, a spokesman for Agudath Israel, said his group's advertisement is not intended to provoke a fight with the Reform movement but is "aimed at doing one thing: making sure the general public, both Jewish and non-Jewish, realizes this is not a Jewish move of a Jewish movement and doesn't reflect Judaism as it has been historically defined."

Agudath Israel's last advertisement in The New York Times, said Shafran, was a 1995 statement denouncing the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

Another Orthodox group, the Rabbinical Council of America, recently published an article in its journal titled, "Homosexuality: A Political Mask for Promiscuity."

That article, written by a retired psychiatrist who identifies himself as a longtime member of a Reform temple, compares homosexuals to smokers and drug addicts, and wrote that they "can change their habits, but only if they want to."

Despite the criticism from Orthodox groups, the CCAR's Menitoff emphasized that the general reaction to the resolution has been positive. "What's been heartening is the tremendous positive response from certainly lots of individuals in the Jewish community, both straight, and gay and lesbian," he said.

"This has meant on a deep level a great deal to not only gay and lesbian Jews but to non-Jews," he added.

He noted that many non-Jewish clergy leaders have privately "expressed their admiration for what we've done and indicated that they hope their respective groups would be able to follow suit in the not-too-distant future." □

## Israel makes withdrawal official

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel has formally notified the United Nations of its intention to withdraw its forces from southern Lebanon by July.

Israel's U.N. ambassador, Yehuda Lancry, presented U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan with a letter to this effect during a meeting Monday at the United Nations. □

## AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

**Activists try to right record by reopening blood libel case***By Magnus Bennett*

PRAGUE (JTA) — The whispers began soon after the battered and strangled body of a 19-year-old seamstress was found on the edge of Brezina Forest in eastern Bohemia in 1899.

Anezka Hruzova had a deep gash around her throat, but apparently little blood was found at the murder scene.

The discovery, a short distance from the town of Polna, revived a centuries-old myth of Jewish ritual murder known as the blood libel — and the prime suspect was a local Jew, Leopold Hilsner.

What happened next created comparisons with the infamous Dreyfus Affair in France.

Both became political pawns in an era of rampant anti-Semitism, and both were convicted of crimes on the thinnest of evidence.

But there was one essential difference.

While Dreyfus was exonerated after a 12-year investigation and reinstated to the army, Hilsner was never vindicated.

His plight has not been forgotten.

Although Hilsner has been dead for more than 70 years, an unlikely alliance of academics, an Italian lawyer and a Czech physician living in Vienna is pressing hard to have the case reviewed in the hope of rehabilitating Hilsner's name and reputation.

"My motive is to fight against stupidity," said Peter Vasicek, a doctor based in Vienna who said HE has invested \$20,000 of his own money campaigning for justice since becoming interested in Hilsner's case five years ago.

Passions were running high at the time Hilsner, 22, was brought to trial under the jurisdiction of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Czech historians point out that at that time anti-Semitism was a common political weapon used by nationalists and radicals in their battle against the forces of social democracy.

The concept of Jewish ritual murder fitted neatly into their political campaigns.

The myth of the blood libel was revived at the end of the 19th century when several Jews were brought before the courts throughout Czech lands and beyond in the years immediately preceding the Hilsner case.

Hilsner stood little chance at his trial, according to Milos Pojar of the Education and Cultural Center of the Jewish Museum in Prague.

"He was a poor man and from such a low class that he couldn't defend himself," he said. "The media also were against him from the beginning. I believe Hilsner was not guilty."

The only important Czech figure to support him was Tomas Masaryk, who went on to become the first president of Czechoslovakia when the state was created in 1918.

Masaryk intervened when Hilsner was convicted and sentenced to death for the murder, calling for a legal review of the case.

His motives were largely political, according to Pojar.

"It was important for Masaryk to rid Czech society of this

superstition of blood libel," he said. "How could the Czech nation enter the 20th century and be part of modern Europe with this terrible belief in this nonsense?"

Hilsner was brought before a second court on the same charge and convicted again.

This conviction occurred despite a lack of convincing forensic evidence and a reliance on indirect testimony, according to Czech academics who recently wrote about the case in a publication supported by the Jewish Museum in Prague.

Hilsner's sentence was later reduced to life imprisonment, and he was eventually released by Austrian Emperor Charles I in 1918. Hilsner spent the rest of his life on the streets, dying in Vienna in 1928 at the age of 52.

Hilsner lived on, however, in another sense.

Adolf Hitler was familiar with the case, and it was used by the Nazi newspaper *Der Sturmer* in the 1930s to justify the policies of the Nazis.

"The Hilsner case was one stone in a mosaic which led to Nazi ideology," says Prague-based German journalist Peter Brod, who has studied the affair in detail.

Now, more than a century after Hruzova's body was found, the effort is being launched to get justice for Hilsner.

Vasicek, the Vienna-based doctor, has secured money from private Austrian sources to restore Hilsner's dilapidated grave in Vienna.

Planning to hit the media trail to highlight the Hilsner case, Vasicek has arranged for a Czech-made documentary on the affair to be shown at the Czech Center in Vienna next month.

The documentary includes a reconstruction of the murder scene by police experts who have dismissed witness accounts, including one who claimed to have clearly seen Hilsner at the murder scene from 700 yards away.

The viewing will be followed by what Vasicek calls "a highly political" lecture at a university in Jerusalem on May 15 titled, "The Hilsner Affair 1899 and Its Echoes in the Czech Republic in 1999."

Vasicek is targeting the Austrian authorities, who have insisted that any legal review should be handled by Czech officials because the trials were held in Czech courts.

But Vasicek has won support from an Italian lawyer who began to study the case last year. Mario Umberto Morini, who is based in Rome, believes the courts came under the jurisdiction of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, whose legal successor is now Austria. He now intends to approach Austria's legal ombudsman in an effort to have the case reviewed.

Morini says he will, if necessary, take the matter to the president of the European Commission, Romano Prodi.

"I believe that in Europe there must be someone who will listen to our cry for justice," said Morini.

In the meantime, the Czech Jewish community awaits the outcome with interest.

Tomas Kraus, executive director of the Federation of Jewish Communities in the Czech Republic, said he supports calls for a legal review of the Hilsner case.

"The Hilsner Affair is very important from the historical perspective of this country," Kraus said.

"There was a lot of anti-Semitic feeling at that time, and I think the case made many people become pro-Semitic because they realized that what accompanied the Hilsner Affair was wrong." □