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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Barak, Arafat meet in Ramallah

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat held their first summit since March. U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross arranged the Sunday night meeting in an effort to achieve progress in the Israeli-Palestinian talks.

Irving ordered to start paying up

Holocaust denier David Irving came a step closer to financial ruin when a British judge ordered him to start paying off millions of dollars in legal costs.

The judge told Irving to make a down payment of some \$250,000 to Penguin Books by June 16 following his failed libel action against the publisher and American historian Deborah Lipstadt.

Albright warns Tehran on 'Iran 13'

Iran must respect its own citizens if it wants international respect, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said, referring to the 13 Iranian Jews on trial amid accusations of spying for Israel.

"Governments from around the world are right in telling officials in Iran that what happens in the trial of the 13 Jews will have repercussions everywhere," she said.

Cabinet approves tax reform plan

Israel's Cabinet approved a tax reform plan aimed at bridging the widening gap between the nation's rich and poor. The plan includes proposals to lower the income tax burden on incomes while introducing a 25 percent tax on capital gains.

U.S. may owe survivors

A presidential panel may determine that the United States owes compensation to Holocaust survivors.

The compensation would cover Jewish-owned bank deposits that were frozen during World War II because the owners were Germans or lived in nations under Nazi control.

The Presidential Advisory Commission on Holocaust Assets in the United States has until the end of the year to write its final report on what became of a wide range of assets, including bank accounts and artworks, that were owned by Holocaust victims but came under the control of U.S. authorities during the war.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

On the streets of Abu Dis, nobody thinks it's Jerusalem

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Jamil Uthman Nasser has a clear view of Jerusalem's Temple Mount from the terrace of his office in the nearby village of Abu Dis.

"You see?" he said, pointing at the Dome of the Rock, its golden roof glittering in the afternoon sun. "That's Jerusalem. This is not."

Nasser, who is governor of the Jerusalem district of the Palestinian Authority, is in charge of close to 200,000 Arabs living in an area including eastern Jerusalem and stretching eastward to Jericho and the Dead Sea.

Most of his "subjects" are Arab residents of Jerusalem who carry Israeli identity cards.

His office is located in Abu Dis, he said, "because that is as close as we could get to Jerusalem."

But his heart lies in Saladin Street, the main street of eastern Jerusalem.

"I am now 54 years old," he said with a smile, "and I am absolutely convinced that before I turn 60, my office will be located on Saladin Street, the present headquarters of the Israeli Justice Ministry."

Such statements fuel the Israeli right, which claims that any concessions regarding Abu Dis will only lead to additional compromises regarding Jerusalem.

Prime Minister Ehud Barak is personally responsible for Abu Dis' recent reappearance in the headlines.

It was his idea to transfer Abu Dis and the neighboring Arab towns of Al-Azariya and Sawahara to full Palestinian control "as a gesture of goodwill toward the Palestinians."

The three towns are currently under joint Israeli-Palestinian control, with the Palestinian Authority in charge of civilian affairs and Israel having responsibility for security.

In the course of negotiations with Israel, Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat has long sought "quality territories" near Jerusalem as part of Israeli redeployments from West Bank lands.

Barak hoped the offer of the three towns would alleviate Palestinian demands regarding Jerusalem while also creating a new momentum in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

Unfortunately for Barak, neither the Palestinians nor his own coalition partners were impressed by his offer.

The National Religious Party threatened to walk out of the coalition if the Palestinians got full control over Abu Dis, and Interior Minister Natan Sharansky of Yisrael Ba'Aliyah called Barak's offer "tactically wrong."

For their part, the Palestinians were simply unimpressed.

"Look," said Nasser, "we are in charge anyway."

"If Israel turns the area over to us, the only difference will be that our security men will finally be able to wear their uniforms and carry arms, and the Israeli army will be prevented from entering the village."

Indeed, the Israeli presence is hardly felt in Abu Dis, where one can hardly spot any signs in Hebrew.

During the morning hours, the narrow entrance to the suburb, just off the old Jericho-Jerusalem road, is almost always filled with young men, waiting for someone

MIDEAST FOCUS

Northern border falls quiet

Israel's northern border was tense but quiet over the weekend, following two Katyusha rocket barrages and Israeli air reprisals.

The Security Cabinet decided against further retaliation following last Friday's Hezbollah attacks, saying Israel is not interested in escalation.

Meanwhile, the Arab League called for a freeze of normalization of ties with Israel as a result of last week's airstrikes.

Poll: Many unhappy with Barak

A majority of Israelis say they are dissatisfied with Prime Minister Ehud Barak's performance and that he has not measured up to their expectations, according to a Gallup poll published in the Israeli daily *Ma'ariv*.

Only 39 percent of those polled said they would vote for Barak if new elections were held now, according to the study.

Clinton urged on Iraq sanctions

U.S. Rep. Joseph Crowley (D-N.Y.) said he is concerned that Israel would be threatened if sanctions against Iraq are lifted.

One hundred twenty-five members of Congress signed a letter to President Clinton urging him to continue sanctions against Iraq to prevent an Iraqi arms buildup that they say would threaten U.S. national security interests.

Arab states call on U.N. to step in

Three Arab states called on the United Nations to take control of security in southern Lebanon following Israel's planned troop withdrawal from the area in July.

The call came during a meeting last week of the foreign ministers of Syria, Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

The meeting was held in the Syrian city of Palmyra.

to offer them work.

The Israeli authorities prevent many of them from entering Israel to work.

In the old days, generations before the village had turned into a Jerusalem suburb, villagers used to make a living by robbing caravans en route between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea.

In the past 200 years Abu Dis developed from a small village into an urban neighborhood, thanks mostly to the emigration of Bedouin tribes from Syria and Jordan.

After Israel occupied the area following the 1967 Six Day War, many families moved to Abu Dis from Hebron and the Gaza Strip as Arab men sought jobs as construction workers in the new Jewish neighborhoods being built in Jerusalem.

Abu Dis first came to international prominence several years ago as part of what became known as the Beilin-Abu Mazen plan.

In a series of secret talks between Yossi Beilin, now Israel's Justice Minister, and Arafat's second-in-command, Abu Mazen, the two agreed on a plan to resolve the question of who would have control over Jerusalem in a final peace accord.

Under their plan, which was never officially confirmed by either side, the boundaries of Jerusalem would expand to include Abu Dis, which would serve as the capital of a future Palestinian state.

Barak's plan to transfer full control over Abu Dis to the Palestinians has so far been greeted with opposition from all possible fronts.

In addition to the protests that were sounded from members of the governing coalition, Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert, a staunch hawk and a possible candidate for the Likud leadership, rushed to Abu Dis last week to discuss the possibility of building some 250 apartments in a new Jewish neighborhood right on the border of the Arab town.

"You Israelis do not really negotiate with the Palestinians," said Farid Mustafa, a Palestinian free-lance journalist. "You negotiate between yourselves, as if we have nothing to say."

Another twist to the complex issue is that not all Arabs living in Jerusalem are eager to become citizens of the Palestinian Authority.

"In fact, most of them don't," said Shalom Goldstein, Olmert's Arab affairs adviser.

Once they become Palestinian citizens, they would have to give up social benefits, including social security payments, and Israel's more advanced health and educational systems.

Moreover, some residents of Abu Dis say they would like to have the town become part of Israeli-controlled Jerusalem, though none would give their names for publication.

"Give me an Israeli ID, and I will pay you \$10,000," said one Arab worker. "Most of the people here are laborers who find their living in Israel. Where are they going to get it in the future?"

Given all the political complexities, Nasser's dream of moving to offices on Saladin Street seemed this week as fantastic as ever. □

Barak warns of 'painful' retaliation

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak is warning that Israel will respond harshly to any further cross-border attacks regardless of its plans to pull Israeli troops out of southern Lebanon by July.

In remarks released from Sunday's weekly Cabinet meeting, Barak said the rules of the game would be changed after the pullback, and if attacked, Israel would give a "painful" response. Barak's comments came amid public calls over the weekend for a more forceful Israeli reaction to the Katyusha rocket attacks that Hezbollah launched late last week on northern Israel, killing one Israeli soldier and lightly wounding more than two dozen people.

Israeli jets later struck Lebanese infrastructure targets, bombing two power stations, as well as a Hezbollah arms storehouse and the Beirut-Damascus road. In response, Hezbollah launched more rockets at northern Israel last Friday, but this time, Israel opted to act with restraint. The Israeli Security Cabinet said Israel was not interested in an escalation and that it reserved the right to respond when and where it deemed appropriate. □



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JEWISH WORLD

Jews still bad, but no longer devils, in rewrite of notorious passion play

By Allison Linn

BERLIN (JTA) — A Christian passion play that was once praised by Adolf Hitler as a “precious tool” against Jews will open again in Bavaria this month following a substantial rewrite with input from American Jewish leaders.

Project adviser Rabbi A. James Rudin, national interreligious affairs director of the American Jewish Committee, applauds the changes, but maintains that “it’s a troubled text, and that’s the bottom line.”

“A Play of Death and Life” tells the story of Jesus. It focuses on the time between Palm Sunday, when Christians believe Jesus entered Jerusalem, and Easter, when Christian tradition says Jesus was resurrected.

The play has been performed in Oberammergau, Germany, every decade since the 1630s. At that time, the Plague-ridden townspeople had promised to perform the play regularly as an offering to God. Over the years, the passion play has become the small town’s claim to fame, and a major part of its livelihood.

“It’s the mother of all passion plays,” said Otto Huber, who rewrote this year’s version of the play along with director Christian Stuckl.

Two thousand Oberammergau residents participate in the six-hour performance, which begins May 21, and countless others benefit in one way or another. This year, it is expected to draw around half a million people over its 4 1/2-month run, including many Americans.

“It’s a religious experience for them,” Rudin said of the theatergoers. “They believe that what they are seeing is the gospel truth, and that’s why I take it so seriously.”

Rudin is not alone. Over the past 30 years, the passion play’s immense popularity has been tainted by ever-louder critiques of its anti-Semitic content. Jewish and Christian leaders have decried portrayals of Jews as greedy, evil and amoral enemies of Jesus.

In a performance Rudin saw in 1984, to mark the 350th anniversary of the passion play, a Jewish priest wore devil horns and other Jewish characters wore robes of the same yellow as the Star of David that Jews were forced to wear under Nazi rule.

The residents of Oberammergau made some changes to the play in the 1980s, but this year’s version marks the first major overhaul.

In preparing the rewrite, Huber said he and the director consulted with Leonard Swidler, professor of Catholic Theology at Temple University, and members of the Anti-Defamation League. Among other changes, in the new version, Jesus says a prayer in Hebrew, and a celebratory meal is called Passover. In addition, the anti-Semitic Bible phrase from Matthew 27:25, “the blood be upon us,” has been taken out.

The goal, Huber said, has been to remove stereotypes of “typical Jews” from both costumes and text, and to eliminate the perception of “bad Jews and good (followers of Jesus).” The play is still very much an insular event — you must have been born in Oberammergau, or have lived there more than 20 years, to participate.

“There are conservatives in Oberammergau who wanted their play to remain the same,” Huber said. The rewrite “was the work of the younger generation. We are interested in telling the story of the power of Christianity, but not in injuring others.”

Rudin and members of the Anti-Defamation League are still concerned about some of the play’s content. In a statement, the ADL commended some changes but also chastised the new script for still casting Jews as unconditional allies of the Roman government that persecuted Jesus. The general sense of the script,” the ADL statement said, is still “of ‘Jewish power’ against Jesus.”

After looking at the rewritten version, Rudin applauded what he called “real progress” and said the writers tried to take out anti-Jewish imagery and text.”

But Rudin still found the play’s stereotyping disturbing enough to ask Jewish and non-Jewish religious leaders in America to submit critiques of the new version. In the end, he said, there are some aspects of the play that are unsalvageable.

“In a passion play, someone has to be the good guy and someone has to be the bad guy,” he said. “And the bad guy is always the Jews.” □

Swiss banks to offer access

Switzerland’s two leading banks said they would let researchers examine more than 2 million dormant bank accounts as part of an effort to verify the claims of Holocaust survivors. The step by Credit Suisse Group and UBS could pave the way for a U.S. judge to approve a \$1.25 billion bank settlement of the claims that the banks agreed to in August 1998.

L.A. federation sells bonds

A \$22.5 million bond sale was completed for the Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles. The proceeds of the bonds will be used to complete the renovation of the federation’s headquarters, which were damaged in the 1994 Northridge earthquake.

Mikvah uncovered in Brazil

Archaeologists discovered an ancient mikvah in northeastern Brazil. The mikvah was hidden under Kahal Zur Israel, what is believed to be the oldest synagogue in the Americas. The temple fell into disuse after Jews were expelled from Recife in 1654.

Shoah marked in Salonika

Greek government ministers were among the 400 people who attended a ceremony in the northern city of Salonika commemorating the Holocaust. During Sunday’s ceremony the ministers lashed out at acts of anti-Semitism that occurred last month when the city hosted a European basketball championship.

German firms pressed to pay

A campaign may be launched to “name and shame” those German firms that do not contribute to a \$5.2 billion slave labor fund. “Just imagine what would happen if companies were named who do not take part,” said fund spokesman Wolfgang Gibowski.

Australian church apologizes

Australia’s third largest Christian denomination issued an apology to the Jewish community and vowed to change its policies. The Uniting Church took the steps after it emerged that church officials give preferential treatment to Christians in a government-funded project to help unemployed Australians find jobs.

All the ‘Babaganewz’ fit to print

Fifth- through eighth-graders at North American Jewish day schools are getting their own magazine, loosely modeled on “Junior Scholastic” but intended to show the relevance of Jewish values to current events.

The first issue of “Babaganewz” features articles on a teen who fought for the right to wear a Jewish star to school and historical fiction about a Jewish immigrant girl.

FOCUS ON ISSUES**Many well-meaning Jews are fooled by World Wide Fib***By Richard Allen Greene*

LONDON (JTA) — Heard the one about the father who told his children he was leaving their mother in order to get them to come home for Passover? What about the man who taught his parrot to daven? Read any good Jewish haiku lately?

If the answer to any of these questions is “yes,” there’s probably e-mail involved. Jewish jokes have been circulating on the Internet since e-mail became widely available, and most forwarded e-mail is amusing or harmless.

But there is a breed of not-so-harmless forwarded e-mail infiltrating the online Jewish community — petitions that ask the recipient to take action against some perceived injustice.

One of the most widely circulated petitions concerns the Old Jewish Cemetery in Prague, which was allegedly under threat from developers who wanted to turn it into residential property.

That e-mail was full of errors and inaccuracies, but it did have an effect on the Czech government, according to a representative of the Czech Ministry of Culture.

An official in the ministry’s Department of Monument Preservation said her office has been getting an average of 20 to 30 cemetery-related e-mails a day since January. Most of them were from Great Britain or the United States, she said, but responses have come from as far away as Venezuela, South Africa and Israel.

A Prague site, but not the Old Jewish Cemetery, had been the subject of controversy since 1998, when an insurance company excavating to build an underground parking lot at its headquarters uncovered the remains of what is probably the Czech Republic’s oldest Jewish cemetery.

The e-mail chain letter alleges that “Pressure is being put on the Jewish Community of Prague by the Czech Government to allow [an] insurance company to build residential properties on the site currently occupied by the Old Jewish Cemetery in the Jewish Quarter of Prague.”

The e-mail claims that the cemetery in question is the one where Rabbi Judah Loew, the legendary creator of the Golem, is buried. It urges readers to e-mail the Czech Minister of Culture, “Mr. Pavel Dorstal,” to protest.

For starters, the Culture Minister’s name is “Dostal,” with no “R.” And the Ceska Pojistovna insurance company plans to build an underground parking garage, not residences. Most important, the graveyard in question is not the famous Old Jewish Cemetery — that cemetery is in Josefov, the historic Jewish Quarter.

The graveyard on Vladislavova Street is an even older Jewish cemetery uncovered during excavation two years ago. Likely the oldest Jewish cemetery in the Czech lands, it had been abandoned and all but forgotten centuries ago, said Tomas Kraus, executive secretary of the Federation of Czech Jewish Communities.

The Czech government, the insurance company and the local Jewish community have reached a compromise under which construction will continue above the cemetery without further disturbing the graves.

But the inaccuracies in the e-mail have not stopped hundreds of people from writing to Dostal — the chain letter does have the correct e-mail address for the Minister of Culture.

New Yorker Helen Bird was one who took action.

“I am not a person who forwards this kind of thing usually,” she told JTA via e-mail. “I did this because I was profoundly touched by the cemetery when I was in Prague. I proceeded to write an impassioned letter of my own, which I forwarded along with the original letter to every Jew or concerned person on my e-mail list. I was therefore incredibly embarrassed to find out that what I had forwarded was misinformation.”

And Bird is not alone. Eyal Dulin, who also lives in the United States, did the same. “I am ashamed to say that I reacted in a knee-jerk fashion when I received the mentioned e-mail.

“It was only after hitting the send button that my common sense suddenly kicked in and I did what I should have done in the first place, question the authenticity of the message,” Dulin concluded.

Residents of the Czech Republic were less likely to be fooled.

Graduate student Denisa Kera was amused by the chain letter at first, but then became angry.

“The petition I got was organized by someone who does not have any idea of what is happening in Prague,” she said. “I was actually amused by the stupidity of someone who wants to save something that is not in danger. But now I acknowledge that it is a dangerous petition because many people believed it.”

There’s no way to know how many people have received the e-mail, but if each person who got it forwarded it to only five people, by the fifth generation there would be 3,125 copies of the message. If those 3,125 people each forwarded it to five people, there would be 15,625 copies.

Some copies have included lists of more than 60 recipients, and Michal Pober, who lives near Prague, said he got the e-mail when it was sent to all the participants in last year’s conference of child survivors of the Holocaust. That conference had literally hundreds of people on its mailing list, so in all probability, hundreds of thousands of people have gotten the chain letter.

Experts on e-mail chain letters have simple advice on what people should do when they receive electronic petitions.

Don’t Spread That Hoax!, a Web site that fights the phenomenon, advises, “Don’t send it unless you either know the message is true, you can authenticate [the sender’s identity], or you know the sender personally and know they would have written this message.

“If the message tells you to do something, check with someone knowledgeable that you can trust,” advises the site, at www.nonprofit.net/hoax/hoax.html.

Andrew Barrett, of the Forum for Responsible and Ethical E-mail, at www.ybecker.net, said, “I distrust unsolicited information no matter which medium is used to propagate it. When it comes to e-mail, it’s particularly helpful to remember that, since it is so inexpensive to send, and can be sent with relative anonymity, the sender risks little or nothing at all by propagating their dubious message.”

Barrett recommends asking a reliable authority before taking any action on e-mail petitions. “Forward them a copy of the message and ask if they’ve seen it before and if they can provide any guidance,” he said.

Don’t Spread That Hoax! also recommends keeping the date in mind when e-mail comes your way. “When April 1 comes up, the Net will be awash in phony messages, forged return addresses, pranks and general amusing nonsense. The best thing to do is read them and have a good laugh.” □