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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Murder trial of N.J. rabbi: A first in American history?

By Marilyn Silverstein

PHILADELPHIA (JTA) — One by one, the headlines have screamed the story of murder, marital infidelity, scandal and disgrace:

“Rabbi Among Suspects in Wife’s Death.” “Religious Leaders React With Sadness, Shock to Neulander Indictment.” “Suspect: Rabbi Paid to Have Wife Killed.” “Confessions of ‘Hit Men’ Rock the Neulander Case.”

In a case that has both roiled and riveted the local Jewish community, Rabbi Fred Neulander, 59, founder and former longtime religious leader of one of the largest Reform congregations in Cherry Hill, N.J., stands charged with accomplice murder and conspiracy to commit murder in the brutal 1994 bludgeoning of his wife, Carol.

In the latest stunning development in the case, two men have now come forward and confessed to beating Carol Neulander to death with a lead pipe — allegedly at the behest of the rabbi.

Leonard Jenoff, 54, a man who has portrayed himself as the rabbi’s private investigator and friend, allegedly told Camden County Prosecutor Lee Solomon in late April that Neulander had offered him \$30,000 to kill a woman the rabbi had described to him as “an enemy of Israel.”

In light of the confessions, Neulander’s trial, which was to have begun June 19, has been postponed indefinitely.

And Solomon is said to be considering “all the options,” including seeking a new indictment against the rabbi for capital murder — a crime punishable by death. The case quite possibly marks the first time in American Jewish life that a rabbi has faced trial for murder.

The story began on the night of Nov. 1, 1994, when the 52-year-old Carol Neulander was found lying in a pool of blood on the living room floor of the family’s stately Colonial home in Cherry Hill. Since that night, a story has slowly unfolded that some observers have likened to a Greek tragedy — the fall of a man from his position of high status, honor and power through his own hubris, or pride, in a drama that evokes pity and terror in those who witness it.

If so, then the chorus in that tragedy has been the media that have chronicled the often-sensational details of Neulander’s fall:

• December 1994. Edward Borden Jr., then-Camden County prosecutor, speaking at a news conference, refuses to rule out the rabbi as a suspect in the murder case.

• February 1995. In the wake of sensational news leaks reporting that the rabbi is being investigated as a suspect in the murder, Neulander requests and is granted a leave of absence from his position as senior rabbi of Congregation M’kor Shalom, which he had founded some 21 years before. M’kor Shalom issues a statement affirming its belief in the rabbi’s innocence.

• March 1995. Neulander resigns from his pulpit at M’kor Shalom. In a funereal Sunday morning meeting, more than 700 congregants crowd into the synagogue’s sanctuary, some of them openly weeping, as the congregational president reads Neulander’s letter of resignation.

The “media frenzy,” the rabbi writes, has “revealed information I am not proud of” and “behavior that brings no honor to me.”

It is assumed that he is referring to revelations brought to light by the ongoing murder investigation of his involvement in marital infidelities, including a liaison with

ADL wants ruling reviewed

The Anti-Defamation League plans to ask a Colorado judge Friday to review an April 28 court decision that found the group liable for defamation and in violation of federal wiretapping laws.

A jury awarded damages of \$10.5 million to a Colorado couple, saying the ADL had falsely accused them of anti-Semitism.

The judge can either dismiss the case, lower the damages or eliminate them altogether.

If he rejects the motion, ADL officials say they will appeal the case.

Egan named to replace O’Connor

The Connecticut bishop selected to replace the late Cardinal John O’Connor has reportedly not played an active role in intercommunal relations.

But Jewish leaders sense that in a city with as diverse a population as New York, Bishop Edward Egan will be obliged to continue the tradition established by O’Connor. [Page 4]

Leah Rabin battling cancer

Leah Rabin, widow of assassinated Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, is suffering from lung cancer and is undergoing tests in the United States.

The Washington Post reported that the illness became known when Rabin failed to appear at a Washington ceremony in her honor.

Scholars: Open Vatican archives

A team of Jewish and Catholic scholars says it has made “substantial progress” in examining published Vatican documents relating to the Holocaust.

The International Catholic-Jewish Historical Commission also renewed a call for the Vatican to open its unpublished wartime archives to outside researchers. [Page 4]

Report: Textbooks ignore Jews

Jews are virtually ignored in Hungarian textbooks, according to a new study.

They appear first as the source of Christianity then “completely disappear for 2,000 years” before they are mentioned again in connection with the Holocaust, according to David Singer, director of research for the American Jewish Committee, which conducted the study.

MIDEAST FOCUS

Weizman: I'll quit early

Israeli President Ezer Weizman said during Independence Day events that he intends to step down by the end of the year, but did not give a specific date. Weizman, 76, who collapsed from dehydration during a reception at his residence Wednesday, has cited his advancing age as a reason for not serving his entire second term, which ends in 2003.

Report: Israel, Egypt plan talks

Israel is ready to participate in arms control discussions with Egypt, the Israeli daily Ha'aretz reported.

The paper said the two countries will try to agree on an agenda for multinational talks on arms control and regional security. Such discussions have been frozen for the past five years over Egypt's insistence on raising the issue of nuclear disarmament.

Court rejects settler's parole

Israel's High Court of Justice reversed a parole board's decision to free a Jewish settler convicted of murdering a Palestinian whose hands and feet were bound. The seven justices ruled unanimously that Yoram Skolnick is still a threat to the public.

In another case, a Tel Aviv court sentenced a Jewish settler to life in prison for the murder of an elderly Palestinian man in a West Bank olive grove more than a year ago.

Gur Hamel was convicted of smashing the 68-year-old Palestinian's skull while he was praying. The court rejected his insanity defense.

Town protests withdrawal

Residents of a northern Israeli town called a general strike to protest the planned troop withdrawal from southern Lebanon.

The strike in Metulla, which shut down stores, schools and government offices, was called to prevent workers from erecting a new border fence.

Philadelphia radio personality Elaine Soncini.

- April 1996. Citing those marital infidelities, the executive board of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the organization of some 1,750 North American Reform rabbis, votes to suspend Neulander's membership for at least two years. The move deprives Neulander of placement services and other privileges of membership in the CCAR. The suspension remains in effect today.

- September-October 1997. During the High Holidays, it comes to light that Neulander is the likely target of a grand jury investigation under way in Camden, N.J. The Philadelphia Inquirer reports that ex-felon Myron "Peppy" Levin, an acquaintance of Neulander's, has testified to the grand jury that a few weeks before Carol Neulander was murdered, the rabbi had asked him if he could help to arrange to have her killed.

- September 1998. On the eve of the High Holidays, Neulander is taken into police custody and arraigned on charges of accomplice murder and conspiracy to commit murder in the death of his wife.

At his arraignment, the rabbi — handcuffed, shackled around the waist with chains and wearing a bright-orange correctional facility jumpsuit — is led into the courtroom by three police officers.

The prosecutor charges in his brief that Neulander "planned and directed the murder of his wife, Carol Neulander," adding that the circumstantial evidence of the rabbi's involvement in the murder is "compelling and overwhelming."

Neulander pleads "not guilty" and is released on \$400,000 bail.

- January 1999. A second grand jury convenes in Camden and, on Jan. 11 indicts the rabbi on charges of accomplice murder and conspiracy to commit murder. The maximum penalty on the charges is life imprisonment, with no possibility of parole for 30 years.

Rabbi Richard Address, regional director of the Reform movement's Union of American Hebrew Congregations and a member of M'kor Shalom, gives voice to the pain of the community when he reacts to news of the indictment with a weary: "Sadness. Just sadness. Just overwhelming sadness."

- June 1999. Neulander's attorneys file a motion to dismiss the murder indictment against the rabbi, citing, among other things, their concerns that critical developments in the case coincided with "religious periods of holiness for the Jewish religion."

- February 2000. The judge in the case, Linda Rosenzweig, denies the motion to dismiss the charges against Neulander. During the hearing, defense attorney Dennis Wixted characterizes the evidence against his client as "insufficient," with "no eyewitness, no corroborating evidence, no weapon recovered."

But Assistant Prosecutor James Lynch issues a stinging rebuttal. He calls the circumstantial evidence against the rabbi — including the testimony of his daughter, Rebecca, indicating that Carol Neulander believed there was a link between her husband and the unknown delivery man who is now alleged to have murdered her — "substantial in volume, broad in scope and powerful in impact."

As the proceedings draw to a close, Neulander declines an opportunity to initiate a plea bargain in the case. The judge sets June 19 as the date of his trial.

- May 2000. Leonard Jenoff allegedly confesses to being that delivery man. He and his alleged accomplice in the murder, Paul Michael Daniels, are arraigned on charges of murder and conspiracy to commit murder. Unable to make bail of \$200,000 and \$400,000, respectively, they remain in the Camden County jail. The judge sets the next pre-trial hearing for early September.

When Neulander's trial finally unfolds, will it truly be an event without precedent in American Jewish history? Will the State of New Jersey vs. Fred Neulander mark the first and only time in American Jewish life that a rabbi has been tried for murder?

An extensive online search of American periodicals yielded a small but colorful catalog of criminal cases involving rabbis, but no murders.

Gary Zola, executive director of the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati, the Reform seminary, said the only case he can recall happened in 1928, in New York. Zola said a rabbi was accused of killing a child in order to use the blood to make matzah for Passover — a "blood libel" case that was ultimately dismissed. □

(Marilyn Silverstein is a staff writer for the Jewish Exponent in Philadelphia.)



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JEWISH WORLD

Dr.: Alleged killer schizophrenic

The man charged with killing five people in a racist shooting rampage last month in suburban Pittsburgh is not competent to stand trial, a psychiatrist testified Tuesday.

Dr. Christine Martone said Richard Scott Baumhammers suffers from paranoid schizophrenia.

Judge Lawrence O'Toole is waiting for a second doctor's report before making a judgment on Baumhammers' competency.

German firms seek legal shield

U.S. and German officials were unable to iron out legal differences on a \$5 billion German fund for Nazi-era slave laborers.

At issue during the discussions in Washington this week is the wording of a document that is supposed to shield German firms contributing to the fund from any future lawsuits in U.S. courts. Negotiators for the two sides hope to have an agreement in place by the time President Clinton visits Berlin next month.

Report: Swiss insurers to settle

Several Swiss insurers agreed to pay \$50 million to settle Holocaust-era claims, Reuters reported, citing sources close to the discussions. The money will be added to a \$1.25 billion settlement that Swiss banks agreed to pay in 1998, the sources said.

Group plans education study

The American Jewish Congress announced it is launching a new national education study that will touch on such issues as teacher quality and charter schools. The announcement came during the group's annual meeting this week in New York.

Religious leaders meet Ventura

Jewish, Muslim and Christian leaders met with Minnesota Gov. Jesse Ventura in an attempt to smooth over relations after Ventura's comments last year in Playboy magazine that "organized religion is a sham and a crutch for weak-minded people."

Stephen Silberfarb, executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Minnesota and the Dakotas, said Ventura "deserves the benefit of the doubt that his remarks in Playboy do not reflect his views."

Crackdown sought on racist fans

Hungary's Foreign Ministry called for a government crackdown on racist and anti-Semitic behavior at soccer games. The call came after fans at some games reportedly chanted, "The train is leaving for Auschwitz" at several games, directed at a team that has had Jewish ownership in the past.

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

Hungarian Jews are detached from communal life, survey says

By Ruth E. Gruber

WASHINGTON (JTA) — A decade after the fall of communism, Hungary's Jews are well-educated, well-off and well-integrated into the social mainstream.

But they are ambivalent about their Jewish identity and highly detached from Jewish communal life.

Memory of the Holocaust and anti-Semitic persecution is the most important factor in their sense of Jewish belonging, although young Jews try to reconnect with Jewish traditions.

This is the profile that emerges from a preliminary analysis of an in-depth survey of Central Europe's largest Jewish community. Full results are expected to be presented later this year.

"Our data show that for Hungarian Jews, belonging to Jewishness is a subjective feeling," Budapest sociologist Andras Kovacs, who coordinated the survey, told JTA during a visit to Washington.

"Objective things, like being active in the Jewish community, are at the other end of the scale."

Carried out last year, the survey was the first of its kind in a post-Communist state, and one of the few carried out in any country.

Aimed in part at providing a basis for strategic policy planning and outreach by Jewish organizations, it was funded by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation, the Claims Conference, the American Jewish Committee and the Alliance of Hungarian Jewish Communities.

With about 100,000 Jews, Hungary's community is the third largest in Europe outside the former Soviet Union. As in other post-Communist countries, there has been a revival of Jewish communal activities since the fall of communism, but only a minority of the community participates in these activities. The survey was based on interviews with 2,015 people selected to approximate a representative random sample, including the highly assimilated as well as active participants.

Kovacs said that all age groups and other groups in the sample rated the Holocaust and anti-Semitic persecution as important factors in their Jewish identity. Participation in Jewish communal activities ranked at the bottom.

The majority of the sample said they felt at least some attachment to Israel, with 27 percent feeling a strong attachment.

"Attachment to Jewish traditions was highest in the oldest groups surveyed and lowest in the middle generation — aged 35 to 55," Kovacs said. "It begins to increase with the younger generation."

The survey showed that mixed marriages are increasing, with the rate among the postwar generation at about 50 percent. Among people older than 75, 90 percent have two Jewish parents; in the 36-45 age group, more than 50 percent and among those 18-25, only 40 percent.

Survey results showed that more than half of Hungary's Jews have a university degree, well above the national average.

In addition, Jews own a full range of modern home appliances — some 47 percent of all Jews sampled own computers, nearly 40 percent have cellular phones and nearly one-quarter have Internet access. Almost 90 percent have washing machines. □

Oscar-winning film to air

NEW YORK (JTA) — An Oscar-winning documentary about the Holocaust is scheduled to air in the United States on HBO on May 25.

"The Last Days," which traces the lives of five Hungarian Jews who survived the war, will be preceded by "Children of the Holocaust," an 18-minute film that includes rare historical footage. □

Cardinal O'Connor's replacement lacks same interfaith credentials

By Michael J. Jordan

NEW YORK (JTA) — The Connecticut bishop tabbed to replace the late Cardinal John O'Connor has reportedly not played an active role in intercommunal relations so far.

But Jewish leaders sense that in a city with as diverse a population as New York, he will be obliged to continue the tradition established by O'Connor.

The Vatican announced Thursday that Bishop Edward Egan, 68, would lead the New York archdiocese, following the May 3 death of O'Connor.

Egan, who has headed the Bridgeport, Conn., diocese since 1988, has distinguished himself as a leader in Catholic education, an effective administrator and a tireless fund-raiser.

He is also a staunch opponent of abortion, contraception and homosexuality.

His interactions with the Jewish community have been few, but positive, said Rabbi James Prosnit of Congregation Bnai Israel, a Reform shul in Bridgeport.

"He's a good man, very elegant, very eloquent," said Prosnit, who noted that Egan had spoken at the rabbi's installation 10 years ago.

"He has mostly been focused on the needs of the diocese, which are extensive.

"He hasn't been particularly visible in interfaith connections. But that doesn't mean he won't follow well in Cardinal O'Connor's footsteps."

Still, Egan has not been completely off the Jewish radar.

When invited, he has appeared at several interfaith events, including a recent conference and prayer breakfast, said Laurie Groff, director of community relations for the Jewish Center for Community Services of Eastern Fairfield County, Conn.

"In his remarks, Bishop Egan always indicates a desire to improve Catholic-Jewish relations," Groff said.

"He is also aware and proud of the strides that have been made so far."

When he's not invited, Egan, unlike O'Connor, has not gone out of his way to improve ties between the two communities, according to another Jewish official in Bridgeport.

"He's not the type to drop in on a synagogue event or for a Jewish holiday," said the official, who requested anonymity. "When he shows up, he does the right thing and says nice things. But can I say he's a great friend of the Jews? I don't know."

To be fair, say local Jewish leaders, the bishopric of Bridgeport is a more parochial post than the New York archdiocese.

Indeed, in New York the archbishop leads a flock of 2.4 million Catholics, said to be the most powerful diocese in the United States.

And they rub shoulders with innumerable ethnic and religious groups — including a million-plus Jewish New Yorkers.

O'Connor condemned racism and anti-Semitism, apologized for the Roman Catholic Church's silence during the Holocaust and pressed for diplomatic relations between the Vatican and Israel.

So Bishop Egan has large shoes to fill, said Rabbi A. James Rudin, director of interreligious affairs for the American Jewish Committee.

"Bishop Egan won't have to start from the beginning," said Rudin. "Cardinal O'Connor has left a rich legacy in Catholic-Jewish relations.

"So many relationships of trust have been established, Bishop Egan will have something to build on. My hope is that he will make these gains in relations a permanent feature of the archdiocese, Catholic education and Catholic liturgy." □

Panel probes Vatican archives, wants more material released

By Ruth E. Gruber

NEW YORK (JTA) — A team of Jewish and Catholic scholars says it has made "substantial progress" in examining published Vatican documents relating to the Holocaust.

The team also renewed a call for the Vatican to open its unpublished wartime archives to outside researchers.

"We remain committed to full openness in the examination of the archival record," the International Catholic-Jewish Historical Commission said in a statement issued after it held a four-day meeting this week in London.

The commission, which has met once before, includes three Jewish and three Catholic scholars and was jointly established last fall by the Vatican and the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations, known as IJCIC.

Its mandate was to review the 11 volumes of World War II archives published by the Vatican between 1965 and 1981 in order to clarify the role of the Roman Catholic Church — and of the wartime pope, Pius XII — during the Holocaust.

The commission was authorized to raise questions and issues not resolved by this published documentation and to request further clarification that could draw on unpublished material from secret Vatican archives.

Early in their work, all six scholars concluded that the full Vatican archives from the period should be opened. Jewish organizations have long pressed for this, against deep-seated Vatican reluctance.

A statement issued following a meeting of the joint commission in December 1999 called for "full access" to archival information.

"The commitment to opening the archives is an overriding objective," IJCIC chairman Seymour Reich told JTA.

Reich said "ambiguities, questions and gaps" emerged in the initial review of all 11 published Vatican volumes.

He did not provide specific examples, but sources said it appears that some of the questions relate to the Vatican's silence in the face of the Nazi persecution of priests and other Catholics as well as of Jews.

These issues will be addressed in a report to be presented at the group's next meeting, slated to be held July in Baltimore.

"We have made substantial progress," the commission said in the statement issued this week.

"Collaborating as Catholic and Jewish scholars on a difficult and controversial subject, we are confident that our work will contribute to a deeper understanding of this painful subject," it said.

"We hope that our combined effort will take the discussion beyond the realm of heated polemic." □