



Daily News Bulletin

Vol. 78, No. 120

Tuesday, June 27, 2000

83rd Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Court told to restudy prayer case

A federal appeals court must restudy a case that would let public school students lead group prayers at graduations, assemblies and sporting events, the Supreme Court ruled Monday.

In light of last week's high court decision that student-led prayers at football games are unconstitutional, the appeals court was told to rethink its decision to allow student-initiated religious speech at school events.

In another ruling, the high court said a white supremacist will not be allowed to obtain a law license. Matthew Hale, the leader of the World Church of the Creator, passed the Illinois state bar exam but was denied acceptance to the bar because state officials said he lacked "good moral character."

Hale, a virulent anti-Semite, said his license is being denied because of his beliefs. The Anti-Defamation League agreed with him, saying denying him a license would set a dangerous precedent.

Austrian insurers given deadline

A group of U.S. public financial officials gave Austrian insurers until July 14 to explain why they have not joined a global effort to settle Holocaust-era claims, according to Reuters.

The U.S. officials did not say what they would do if the insurers missed the deadline.

Allies had info on Italian Jews

Allied intelligence agents had information in 1943 that could have been used to save some Italian Jews from a Nazi roundup, according to U.S. historians.

The disclosure was made Monday, when officials at the U.S. National Archives near Washington released some 400,000 pages of declassified World War II documents.

Tensions hurting U.S.-Israel talks

The commander of Israel's air force urged that a solution to tensions with the United States over Israel's planned sale to China of an advanced airborne warning system be resolved "as soon as possible."

Gen. Dan Halutz told a news conference it is increasingly difficult to conduct an open dialogue with U.S. officials because of the controversy surrounding the sale.

Czech chief rabbi denounces Jewish burial site protesters

By Magnus Bennett

PRAGUE (JTA) — The chief rabbi of the Czech Republic has launched a scathing attack on Orthodox Jews from abroad who are protesting plans to build above one of Europe's oldest Jewish burial sites.

Rabbi Karol Sidon told JTA that the protesters are "not decent people" and said he has received phone calls from Jews threatening him and his family.

The anger is over a compromise reached among the Prague Jewish community, the government and the country's biggest insurance company that will allow construction of the office complex to continue.

"I am breaking my silence now because I want my statement to be clear now. I want to be heard," he said.

Sidon attacked the "lies" that prompted worldwide interest in the cemetery in central Prague and condemned the tactics of the Orthodox groups. Those groups have staged a series of protests in New York, London, Brussels and Prague over the construction by site owner Ceska pojistovna, the Czech Republic's largest insurer.

Since the 750-year-old cemetery was discovered several years ago, Orthodox groups dedicated to preserving Jewish heritage have focused their attention on it.

After the compromise was reached several months ago, Prague's Jewish community has come under intense pressure from international Jewish organizations.

The compromise, announced by the Czech government in March, involved preserving the site by encasing the remains of several hundred Jews in concrete. The remains of up to another 160 Jews, which had been removed from the cemetery for anthropological research, were also to be returned as soon as possible.

The local Jewish community, which felt that the deal was the best possible offer, reluctantly endorsed the decision.

The issue first hit the international stage last year, when misinformation relayed over the Internet said the burial site was Prague's famous Old Cemetery, actually located a half-mile away.

The involvement of foreign Jewish groups became particularly heated six months ago, Sidon said, following another misinformation campaign over the Internet — this time "by Jews acting in their own interests," who spread rumors that the Prague Jewish community owned the site and had sold it to Ceska pojistovna. The protests by those groups have made the local community's job considerably harder, Sidon charged.

Earlier this month, Czech police fined a dozen "English-speaking" Jewish protesters for entering the construction site and refusing to leave.

Sidon said the presence of the foreign Jews prevented reburial of the remains.

He said Ceska pojistovna lost its nerve the last time he tried to return the remains, several weeks ago, because of the presence of dozens of foreign Jews who had "somehow heard about our plans."

Sidon is not alone in his condemnation of the tactics of Jewish groups determined to halt the project.

Tomas Kraus, executive director of the Federation of Czech Jewish Communities, also describes the protests as counterproductive.

"In a way, this is like David and Goliath. We Jews are good at fighting Goliath," he said. "We appreciate" that the foreign protesters "are so interested in our issue, and we are aware of the international aspect of all this, but the key player is only us."

At least one of the groups that has weighed in on the issue, the London-based

MIDEAST FOCUS

SLA members to get Israeli IDs

Israel's Interior Ministry is expected to issue temporary resident identity cards this week to the estimated 5,000 former members of the South Lebanon Army and their families who sought asylum since the Israeli troop withdrawal from southern Lebanon.

Soldier injured at Lebanon border

An Israeli soldier was lightly hurt by a stone thrown from the Lebanese side of the border, but troops did not open fire.

The border area has become a gathering point for Lebanese who throw rocks and objects at the Israeli soldiers on the other side.

Desalination plant planned

Israel is expected to seek bids in the coming weeks to build a desalination plant. At an urgent Cabinet session convened by Prime Minister Ehud Barak about an expected water shortage, his ministers agreed to continue contacts with Turkey to import water as an emergency measure.

Meretz minister bids farewell

Meretz Party leader Yossi Sarid said farewell to Israel's Education Ministry, which he left to enable the fervently Orthodox Shas Party to remain in the government.

Deputy Education Minister Shaul Yahalom, of the National Religious Party, said he regrets Sarid's departure despite their ideological differences.

Sharansky offers weekend plan

Israeli Interior Minister Natan Sharansky proposed that Israel formalize a two-day weekend spanning Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath, and Sunday.

Sharansky said the move would put Israel in step economically with most countries where Sunday is a day of rest. Prime Minister Ehud Barak called the proposal interesting and worth exploring.



Daily News Bulletin

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JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN is published five days a week, except holidays, by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency Inc., 330 Seventh Ave., New York, N.Y. 10001-5010. For information about how to subscribe by e-mail, fax or regular mail, call (212) 643-1890, or visit our Web site at www.jta.org.
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Committee for the Preservation of Jewish Cemeteries in Europe, could not disagree more.

The compromise reached by the Prague Jewish community, the government and Ceska pojistovna "was made under pressure," said Rabbi Abraham Ginsberg, an official with the Committee. "It was a mistake."

Ginsberg, who said he had "no idea" who was responsible for the threatening calls to Sidon, also maintained that the question of how the cemetery should be dealt with is not a matter for the local community to decide.

The Prague community "is not in a position where they know if [the agreement] is halachically acceptable," Ginsberg told JTA, referring to whether the plans for the cemetery conform to Jewish law.

He said a community rabbi should not decide on an important issue like the fate of this burial site. That is a question for a rabbinical court, Ginsberg said.

"I cannot understand how the community took this decision on their own," he added.

Regarding international interest in the matter, Ginsberg said, "We are being bombarded with 40 to 50 faxes a day asking what's going on with the cemetery."

If the matter isn't resolved soon, he added, "We won't be able to control the hundreds of thousands of people all over the world who are upset about this."

Meanwhile, Kraus' counterpart in Slovakia, Fero Alexander, expressed support for the Prague community.

"We do not support these Orthodox Jews who are making these riots in Prague," Alexander said. "We don't know exactly what is going on there, but we do know that these demonstrators are not people you can settle with."

The Czech government, too, has taken a hard line with the foreign protesters. Culture Minister Pavel Dostal said last Friday he does not intend to meet the demands of foreign Jewish groups that construction at the site be halted. □

(JTA correspondent Richard Allen Greene in London contributed to this report.)

Television miniseries to tell story of U.S. rescue of Jewish refugees

By Tom Tugend

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — The story of 1,000 Jewish refugees plucked from Europe in the midst of World War II and transported to safety in the United States is being filmed as a four-hour miniseries for CBS Television.

"Haven," which features Natasha Richardson, Anne Bancroft, Martin Landau and Hal Holbrook, is scheduled to be aired in February.

"Haven" is based on the book of the same title by the journalist Ruth Gruber, who is not related to the JTA journalist with the same name.

In 1944, Gruber, then a young assistant to U.S. Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes, wrangled an assignment to escort the refugees in their journey from Italy to New York.

The rescue of the refugees, including former concentration camp inmates, was a one-time gesture by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, but even this was marred by the attitudes of many American soldiers and officials.

Wounded GIs aboard the ship named the Henry Gibbins objected to the effort, saying that the space given to the refugees should have been reserved for their wounded comrades.

After arriving in the United States, the refugees were herded into a virtual prison camp near Oswego, N.Y., and kept there until the end of the war.

Government officials, fearing a backlash if more Jews were admitted, foiled attempts by Gruber to publicize the plight of Jewish refugees and grant citizenship to those held in the camp.

Expected to be included in the film is rarely seen color footage shot by U.S. cameraman George Stevens immediately after the liberation of the Dachau concentration camp. □

JEWISH WORLD

Court: Juries must rule on hate

The Supreme Court ruled Monday that juries, not judges, must decide whether harsher sentencing should apply to hate crimes cases.

The 5-4 decision answers a procedural question, since in most states with some type of hate crime law there is already the specification that a jury must decide whether a defendant was motivated by bias.

Italian Jews target street name

Thanks to a fax and letter-writing campaign sponsored by Italian Jews, an Italian town council reversed a decision to name a street after a scientist who backed the nation's fascist anti-Semitic laws.

Italian Jewish leaders had protested the decision to name a street in the southern town of Pesche after Nicola Pende, an eminent pathologist who signed a "manifesto of racist scientists" in 1938.

This document, which "proved" Italians to be "Aryans," paved the way for anti-Semitic laws issued later that year.

Czech extremist released

The leader of a Czech extreme-right group was released from a Prague prison.

Vladimir Skoupy of the National Alliance had been sentenced earlier this month to one year in prison for propagating Nazism and inciting racial hatred.

Skoupy, whose crimes included publicly denying the Holocaust, had been held in custody since his arrest in February.

He has vowed not to repeat the offenses.

Diplomat charged with smuggling

Canadian officials charged a former diplomatic officer with smuggling cocaine into Israel while he was stationed at the Canadian Embassy in Tel Aviv in 1996.

Although Israeli police had information connecting Douglas Wardle with a smuggling ring, they could not charge him because of his diplomatic immunity.

Brigade fighter dead at 102

Joshua Myron, one of the last surviving members of the Zionist brigade that fought against Turkey in Palestine during World War I, died earlier this month in New York at the age of 102.

Myron was one of the members of the Jewish Legion, led by Ze'ev Jabotinsky, that used camels to move from front to front.

Born in Rishon le-Zion to parents who had immigrated from Russia, he moved to New York after World War I and became a pharmacist.

He then returned to Palestine before eventually settling in New York.

Birthright student's death cuts short his Jewish journey

By Brian Seidman

NEW YORK (JTA) — Joseph Ferraro, 20, traveled on the Birthright Israel program looking to explore his Jewish heritage.

His advisers say Ferraro found a connection to Judaism during his 10-day trip to Israel, but barely had time to absorb it before his life was cut short.

Ferraro, of Rochester, N.Y., died last Friday of bacterial meningitis shortly after he returned from his trip.

At the Western Wall, Ferraro wore tallit and tefillin, and told his Birthright group that he was moved by thoughts of his grandmother as he stood there.

By the end of his trip, Ferraro wore a Star of David, and had plans to extend his journey by remaining with a friend in Jerusalem.

But flu-like symptoms convinced Ferraro to return home with his group, and he died nearly two hours after arriving at Newark International Airport.

According to the Rochester News, New Jersey health officials advised 13 passengers from Ferraro's flight to take an antibiotic used to treat meningitis.

A message on the Web site of Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life, which helped sponsor the trip, urged students who had "direct personal contact" with Ferraro to contact their physicians. Bacterial meningitis spreads through the sharing of saliva, including kissing, or the sharing of silverware or food.

Ferraro, a film student at the Rochester Institute of Technology, decided to film the Birthright trip with the intention of editing it and making copies for the other group members.

The video idea came "from his heart," said trip adviser and Rochester Institute professor Ellie Rosenfield. "The power of the trip inspired him." The video included interviews with other Birthright participants, some of whom are deaf.

At the beginning of the 10 days, the deaf and hearing students remained separate, Rosenfield said. Ferraro was one of the students who knew sign language.

"He helped with bridging the two groups. I couldn't believe at the end of the trip how well they were mixing. Joe was part of the reason this happened."

While in Israel, the students wrote letters about their experiences. Ferraro chose to share his letter with his group.

"I have learned a lot about myself, my family, and my religion in the last 10 days. I remember an hour and a half on day four I spent talking and arguing with myself about staying longer in Israel. I knew I should stay. I knew I had commitments at home. But this is a big experience, once in a lifetime, [and] I don't know if I will ever come back," he wrote. The letter continued: "This was a dream come true, making me think of how much I love my family and how much I want to learn about Jewish culture."

Rabbi Ari Israel, another of the trip's chaperones and the director of the Rochester Hillel, delivered a eulogy at Ferraro's funeral Monday. "I have rarely seen a college student express himself or the love for his family in such ways," Israel said. Members of the Rochester Hillel have discussed completing Ferraro's film in his memory.

Rosenfield spoke to many of the trip's participants after Ferraro's death.

"They saw Joe and how much the trip meant to him. It was a tremendous experience. We can't explain why these things happen; we just have to take care of each other through this." □

Horse named for Auschwitz hero places third

NEW YORK (JTA) — A horse named after a Polish Jewish woman who helped smuggle gunpowder for a 1944 uprising at Auschwitz finished third in a \$250,000 race Saturday in New York.

Fletcher Clement, a Vietnam veteran and real estate broker who named his horse for Roza Robotka, learned about the Sonderkommando revolt in the mid-1980s.

For her part in the revolt, in which one crematorium was destroyed, Robotka was hanged on Jan. 6, 1945, less than two weeks before Auschwitz was evacuated. □

West Coast Jewish leaders defend Muslim who had raised ire of East

By Tom Tugend

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — Jewish leaders here have again come to the defense of a controversial Muslim leader who was rejected last year from a national commission on terrorism.

But in contrast to last year's events involving Salam Al-Marayati, most national groups decided to stay out of the recent controversy, which was raised in a local congressional campaign.

Last year, local Jewish leaders complained that national Jewish organizations based on the East Coast denounced Al-Marayati without consulting them after the Muslim leader was named to a national anti-terrorism commission.

The appointment was later rescinded.

Local Jewish leaders backed Al-Marayati after the campaign manager of Rep. James Rogan (R-Calif.) criticized his Democratic challenger in the upcoming election, state Sen. Adam Schiff, for attending a forum with the controversial Muslim leader.

"I have worked with Al-Marayati on many community events," said Rabbi Gilbert Kollin of the Pasadena Jewish Temple and Center, in Rogan's district. "I'm sure we don't agree on, say, the future of Jerusalem, but no one has a right to suggest that he is an apologist for terrorism."

Kollin made his comments at a news conference last week in Al-Marayati's defense attended by a dozen liberal clergymen and community leaders of various faiths.

Irv Rubin, the leader of the Jewish Defense League, enlivened the conference by hoisting a pro-Rogan sign reading, "Rogan Doesn't Kiss Terrorists' Butt."

The controversy began after Al-Marayati's organization, the Muslim Public Affairs Committee, together with Mormon, Presbyterian and Unitarian churches, sponsored a forum on "The Role of Alcohol in Crime."

Schiff and Los Angeles County District Attorney Gil Garcetti were the main speakers.

Two days later, Jason Roe, Rogan's campaign manager, was quoted in the Los Angeles Times as saying that Schiff's presence at the same forum with Al-Marayati "raised some questions about the associations" Schiff "plans to keep" if elected to Congress.

Pointing to the pro-terrorist sentiments attributed to Al-Marayati last year, Roe said it seems "odd that Sen. Schiff would feel comfortable, especially as a Jew, to be participating in this event."

Roe added that Rogan had declined to appear at the same forum because of Al-Marayati's co-sponsorship of the meeting.

Parke Skelton, Schiff's campaign manager, said that Rogan "is trying to drive a wedge between Schiff and the Jewish community." Al-Marayati said Rogan had attended several events with him during the past five years.

Rogan, running for re-election in a district north of Los Angeles, was one of the most zealous among the 13 Republican House managers who carried the impeachment charges against President Clinton last year.

The race, whose outcome may help determine which party controls the House next year, is neck and neck, with both sides pouring millions of dollars into the contest.

A year ago, the sharpest protests to Al-Marayati's appointment

to the National Commission on Terrorism by House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt (D-Mo.) came from the New York headquarters of the American Jewish Congress, Anti-Defamation League and the Conference of Presidents of American Jewish Organizations.

Al-Marayati maintained that the statements attributed to him were lies or comments twisted out of context, and many local Jewish liberal leaders and the city's main Jewish newspaper came to his defense, but Gephardt withdrew the Muslim leader's nomination.

A Christian Arab American was appointed to the commission.

The attacks elicited widespread resentment from Los Angeles officials and members of the organizations.

In addition, some national Jewish organizations criticized a code of ethics signed last year by Los Angeles Jewish and Muslim leaders.

The regional director of the Anti-Defamation League, whose national headquarters protested Al-Marayati's appointment last year, indicated the changed attitude.

"We have had and continue to have substantial differences with Salam Al-Marayati on a variety of issues," said David Lehrer. "But that doesn't mean that we or others ought to shun him or treat him as a pariah. There is room for civil discourse."

Added Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice president of the Conference of Presidents, "In contrast to last year, I consider the present controversy a local matter and we won't get into it."

One organization that spearheaded last year's protest about the appointment of Al-Marayati to the anti-terrorism commission refused to change its tactics.

The president of the Zionist Organization of America, Morton Klein, said, "No person in politics should have any dealing with a man who praises such terrorist groups as Hamas and Hezbollah, and who signed a letter calling for the dismantling of Israel."

"The fact that Schiff appeared in public with Al-Marayati gives credibility to a man who compared Prime Minister Netanyahu to Hitler and praised Holocaust deniers."

Rabbi Dov Fischer, president of the ZOA's Los Angeles district, launched a media campaign in support of Rogan.

Meanwhile, the controversy quieted by the end of last week.

Rogan and Al-Marayati met at a Chamber of Commerce banquet, and the congressman handed the Muslim leader a letter, which said in part:

"I have reviewed statements attributed to you. Many of them were hostile toward Israel. As a longtime supporter of Israel, I strongly reject those sentiments.

"However, provocative foreign policy opinions do not equate with pro-terrorist opinions. I find nothing in your previous statements that I have seen indicating you encourage or support terrorism." □

Polish activist gets off scot-free

NEW YORK (JTA) — A Polish court has reduced the sentence of a Polish activist who launched a campaign in 1998 to erect crosses at the site of the Auschwitz death camp.

The court recently upheld the conviction against Kazimerz Switon, but reduced his six-month suspended sentence to a fine.

The court then canceled the fine because Switon spent a month in jail in 1999 on unproven charges, said a court spokesman. □