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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

'Iran 10' lawyer: Threats made

The lawyer representing 10 Iranian Jews convicted on charges of spying for Israel has issued a call for help, according to an American Jewish advocate for the jailed Jews. Ismail Nasserri may be "afraid that after the appeal is over, somebody's going to bump him off," said Malcolm Hoenlein.

Nasserri said Iranian officials had threatened to charge him with espionage if he did not help convict the 10.

Lieberman comment criticized

Democratic vice presidential candidate Joseph Lieberman is raising eyebrows for telling a radio talk show host that intermarriage is permissible for Jews.

"The senator's statements misrepresent basic foundations of our faith," the fervently Orthodox Agudath Israel of America said in a statement after Lieberman told Don Imus that there is "no ban whatsoever" on Jews intermarrying.

Israel, Palestinians resume talks

Israeli and Palestinian officials resumed contacts Wednesday, a day after Israel made conflicting announcements about whether negotiations were on or off. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak came under widespread criticism for first canceling, then rescheduling contacts with the Palestinians.

Israel declares virus 'epidemic'

Israeli health officials said the spread of the West Nile virus in the country has reached "epidemic" proportions. Since August, the virus has killed 13 people and left 161 sick, the Health Ministry said Wednesday. A ministry spokeswoman said officials are trying to combat the virus by spraying mosquito-infested areas and warning people to use insect repellents.

Swiss official sparks uproar

Swiss Jewish leaders are calling for the dismissal of a Finance Ministry official because of anti-Semitic articles he wrote for an Internet site. Hanspeter Sutter wrote that if Hitler had "killed all the Jews, Switzerland would not have to pay billions to Holocaust survivors." Finance Minister Kaspar Villiger said he was shocked by the articles, but he refused to dismiss Sutter.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Israelis back 'secular revolution,' but doubt Barak can follow through

By David Landau

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The battle lines between Orthodox and secular Israelis were drawn sharper than ever this week.

The nation's two chief rabbis reversed themselves and joined Orthodox politicians in the fight against Prime Minister Ehud Barak's recently announced "civic agenda."

Dubbed by the press a "secular revolution," Barak announced the program earlier this month in an effort to usher in an era of secular reforms.

The first step, ordered this week by acting Interior Minister Haim Ramon, calls for the removal of the nationality clause from the identity card that every resident of the Jewish state must carry.

Removing the clause could help solve a long-running dispute over conversions performed in the Jewish state, since the state would no longer be responsible for defining who is a Jew.

But these and other components of the secular revolution have been attacked by some in the Orthodox community as an attempt by the premier to wreak revenge on the religious parties that dropped out of his coalition on the eve of July's Camp David summit.

Only Rabbi Michael Melchior, a member of the Barak government from the small, Orthodox Meimad Party, is still trying to hold the middle ground.

On Sunday, Melchior announced his own reform plan, which he said sought to balance the conflicting demands of both sides of the religious-secular debate.

Barak said he would seriously consider the plan proposed by Melchior, who as minister for Israeli society and world Jewish communities has tackled religious-secular issues for the Barak government.

Israel's chief rabbis, however, were less inclined toward compromise when it came to Barak's planned reforms — especially his proposal to abolish the Religious Affairs Ministry.

At a stormy meeting Monday with the "Orthodox lobby" of legislators from the religious parties, the two chief rabbis confirmed that they had supported the idea in the past, feeling that the ministry and the religious councils across the nation that it governs are hotbeds of mismanagement.

The rabbis said they originally thought Barak's plan was designed to improve the provision of religious services to local communities.

But in light of Barak's other secular reforms, they added, they now decided that the plan to abolish the ministry was politically motivated.

"We call" on Barak, Justice Minister Yossi Beilin and "on all the national leadership to preserve the Jewish character of the state and to cease and desist from any process that contravenes the integral relationship between religion, state and peoplehood," the rabbis announced, throwing down the gauntlet to the Israeli prime minister.

Meanwhile, the plan to erase the nationality clause from identity cards crossed a final hurdle this week, when the Shin Bet domestic security service announced that it would not oppose the move.

In the past, security reasons have always been cited by those opposed to this measure.

The identity card currently defines the bearer as "Jew" by nationality, or else as

MIDEAST FOCUS

Chernobyl still affecting children

Children born after the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear accident in Ukraine are more likely to suffer from radiation diseases than those who were in the area at the time of the disaster.

This conclusion comes from an Israeli study of 1,080 Jewish children brought from the affected areas around Chernobyl to Israel as part of the Lubavitch movement's Children of Chernobyl program.

The findings were released at a news conference that coincided with the arrival of the 2,001st child to come since the start of the project.

Lebanese kids go to Israeli class

Some 150 Lebanese students began the Israeli school year in the northern town of Kiryat Shmona, according to the Jerusalem Post.

The students are children of South Lebanon Army officials who sought refuge in Israel after the Israel Defense Force withdrew from Lebanon in May.

Vienna mayor visits Yad Vashem

The mayor of Vienna ended a two-day trip to Israel with a tour of Jerusalem's Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial. Tel Aviv Mayor Ron Huldai invited Michael Haupl to Israel in an attempt to mend relations after Israel recalled its ambassador earlier this year to protest the inclusion of the far-right Freedom Party in the Austrian government.

Citibank to expand in Israel

U.S.-based Citibank plans to launch retail banking branches in Israel by the second quarter of next year, the bank's vice chairman said Wednesday.

William Rhodes said it is too early to determine how many branches it would open, but it would include a "combination of bricks-and-mortar branches" as well as Internet banking services. Since July, the bank has been offering corporate banking service in Tel Aviv as part of a pilot program.



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Arab, Russian, American or some other non-Jewish designation.

At this time, several cases are pending before the High Court of Justice by people who were converted in Israel by non-Orthodox movements and are demanding the right to be designated as a Jew on their identity cards.

The removal of the nationality clause, while mitigating this aspect of the perennial "Who is a Jew" dispute, does not completely resolve the issue because the distinction between Jews and other groups will still be maintained in the state's official population registry.

But it is certainly seen by both sides in the dispute as a significant step toward severing the connection between the Orthodox establishment and the laws of the state when it comes to defining a citizen's Jewishness.

In the past, the clause's removal was, in fact, embraced by some Orthodox politicians as a way of taking the heat out of the dispute — by eliminating what is considered a blatant instrument of discrimination while at the same time retaining the bureaucratic categorization of the population.

But now, in the superheated political climate brought on by the prime minister's secular revolution, compromise and flexibility are in retreat as both sides harden their positions.

For the Orthodox parties, the removal of the clause is the opening shot in a battle now threatening, as they see it, to sweep across Israeli society.

"Barak and Beilin state openly that they are proceeding to implement an entire secular agenda," Shaul Yahalom of the National Religious Party thundered at Monday's meeting of the Orthodox lobby.

He cited the premier's pledge that El Al would by flying on Saturdays within a month, that public transportation would likewise operate on Saturdays and religious holidays and that civil marriages would be instituted.

Under present law, only religious marriages — those sanctioned by the Orthodox establishment — are available to Jews in Israel.

Yahalom could also have mentioned Barak's promise to complete Israel's long-evolving Constitution.

Draft legislation designed to enshrine certain basic rights has run into opposition from the Orthodox parties, which fear the laws will conflict with or even discriminate against religious precepts.

Opinion polls are meanwhile providing a consistent picture: Two-thirds of Israelis favor Barak's secular revolution, while the remaining one-third of respondents oppose it.

Significantly, though, the same polls indicate a great degree of skepticism regarding how much of Barak's program will, in fact, be implemented.

Indeed, Barak himself has made it clear that if the peace negotiations with the Palestinians overcome their final obstacles and move toward a final peace agreement, his domestic agenda will quickly be shoved back onto the back burner.

If that happens, Barak will likely try to woo back the Orthodox parties, especially the politically moderate Shas Party, into his coalition.

If that requires him to abandon the secular revolution, so be it.

The public's skepticism also reflects a widespread assessment that, if the peace talks fail, the government's days are numbered and new elections will take place late in 2000 or early in the new year.

No controversial legislation affecting the relationship between religion and state will move through the Knesset if this scenario unfolds.

But Barak maintains that if the peace talks fail, he will succeed in setting up a government with the Likud opposition that will be based, in part at least, on his secular agenda.

This agenda, after all, is plainly appealing to many Likud voters, as the polls unmistakably show.

But, so far at least, Likud Party leader Ariel Sharon shows no signs of being wooed.

He favors a constitution, Sharon says.

But only in consultation with all sectors of the public — including, presumably, the religious parties. □

JEWISH WORLD

Demographic study sparks debate over predicting the future

By Gayle Horwitz

Funds offered for day schools

A foundation is offering what it believes is the largest-ever interest-free loan program for building construction at Jewish day schools.

The New York-based Avi Chai Foundation, which provides grants and supports research related to day schools, has a \$50 million loan pool and is inviting individual schools to apply for loans of up to \$1 million.

Rabbis told to 'make nice'

A Jewish organization is challenging rabbis to call a colleague from a different stream of Judaism this Rosh Hashanah and wish them a good year.

The New York-based CLAL: The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership is also offering for the High Holidays a series of meditations on the value of multiple voices and opinions in the Jewish world.

CLAL's moves come after the recent release of "Jew vs. Jew," a book chronicling tensions between different sectors of the American Jewish community.

Hungarian survivors mark Shoah

Hungarian survivors of the Holocaust held a remembrance day this week in Budapest.

The commemoration, which attracted several hundred people out of the city's approximately 20,000 survivors, was organized by the Hungarian Jewish Heritage Foundation.

Jewish communities get grants

The American Jewish World Service awarded more than \$100,000 to support Jewish communities in the former Soviet Union.

Among the projects funded by the group's Jewish Community Development Fund in Russia and Ukraine are a tolerance education program and a Jewish Internet center.

German neo-Nazis sentenced

A German court Wednesday sentenced four neo-Nazi youths to prison for up to 18 months for assaulting two African asylum seekers and then chasing them through the city of Eisenach.

Last month, another German court sentenced three other neo-Nazis to long prison terms for killing a Mozambican man, one of at least three victims to die in neo-Nazi attacks this summer in Germany.

Czech synagogue restored

A 260-year-old dilapidated synagogue in the Czech town of Ledec Nad Sazavou has been restored and converted into a concert and exhibition hall.

It will be used to commemorate the local Jewish community, which was wiped out by the Nazis during World War II.

WASHINGTON (JTA) — A recent study that projects the shape of the world Jewish community through 2080 has touched off debate among some demographers who question the value of reaching so far into the future.

"Long-term projections from demographers have the same accuracy as economists today predicting the economy 80 years from now," said Gary Tobin, president of the San Francisco-based Institute for Jewish and Community Research.

Because projections are made on the presumption that present conditions will not change, their conclusions have "no value," he said.

"We cannot predict significant changes over time," he added. "Their only value is in examining where we are at in the present."

The findings of a team of scholars from Hebrew University, published last week by the American Jewish Committee in the American Jewish Year Book 2000, predicted that in the next 80 years, America's Jewish population would decline by one-third to 3.8 million if current fertility rates and migration patterns continue.

In the same period, according to the study, the number of Jews in Israel will likely double, swelling to 10 million.

The study also anticipated a severe decline in the number of Jews in the former Soviet Union. By 2080, the data suggested, the Jewish community there will be virtually wiped out.

Among the study's conclusions was that Israel would be home to the world's largest Jewish community as early as 2020, and the majority of the world's Jews by 2050.

The article, "Prospecting the Jewish Future: Population Projections, 2000-2080" offers demographic projections for Jewish communities throughout the world in the years 2020 and 2050, as well as 2080. It also offers adjusted scenarios based on changes in fertility rates.

Sergio DellaPergola, chairman of the Harman Institute of Contemporary Jewry of Hebrew University, who headed the study, readily concedes that the science of making projections is imprecise and likely to be affected by unforeseen political and technological changes.

But he defends the usefulness of his research.

"Don't be swept up by the 2080 numbers," said DellaPergola, whose research team spent three years sifting through hundreds of population studies from around the world.

"Our main interest is in the short term. I do not believe 2020 will be so different than 2000."

Population projections have long been an important tool in helping governments, international organizations and even local communities plan for the future.

DellaPergola points out that the United Nations, for example, utilizes projections though 2150 to make decisions on how its resources can be best deployed.

Jewish communities, struggling to stretch limited financial resources, are no different, he said.

The study noted in particular the rapidly aging Diaspora community, saying that by the year 2080, more than 40 percent of Diaspora Jews will be 65 and older.

The study warned that Jewish social services to the elderly could be overwhelmed as a result. He also suggested that this trend could intensify the current struggle over dividing resources between American Jewry and Israel.

He said he hopes the study will "ring the bell" for Jewish communities, about issues such as these that are looming on the horizon.

Ira Sheskin of the University of Miami, one of the scholars working on the 2000 National Jewish Population Survey, which is currently under way, called the recent projections "a great starting point for discussion."

But, he added, "Think if this were the year 1900, what could we have predicted? The Holocaust? The State of Israel? The very concept" of projections "is a difficult one." □

ARTS & CULTURE

Film tells story of children saved on eve of Holocaust

By Tom Tugend

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — For the producer of a new documentary about the transport of some 10,000 refugee children to Great Britain on the eve of World War II, the connection was personal.

Deborah Oppenheimer's mother, born Sylva Avramovici, had just turned 11 when her parents put her on a train in Germany with tearful assurances that the family would soon be reunited.

Sylva never saw her parents again, nor did some 90 percent of the other evacuated children during the Kindertransport, or Children's Transport.

Some 60 years later, this little-remembered chapter of rescue and heartbreak is preserved in the Warner Brothers Pictures documentary "Into the Arms of Strangers: Stories of the Kindertransport."

The film opened last Friday in New York, Los Angeles, Toronto, Boston and Washington.

In the year leading up to World War II, Jews desperate to leave Nazi-dominated Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia found the world's doors of refuge mainly closed.

Great Britain agreed in late 1938 to accept children — mostly Jewish — between the ages of 2 and 17. However, no one 18 or older, including the children's parents, would be admitted.

Growing up on Long Island, Oppenheimer learned early on not to ask about her mother's childhood.

"I tried to bring up the subject and my mother would cry, then I would cry, and then I withdrew for fear of opening up this vast hurt," says Oppenheimer, a veteran television producer.

"My mother died in late 1993, and as one way of dealing with my grief, I decided to find out all I could about her childhood roots, now that the earlier restraints about hurting her had been lifted," Oppenheimer says.

She spent long months digging into old letters and diaries and long nights and weekends in phone calls to the main centers of surviving Kindertransporters in England, Israel and New York.

Once contacted for preliminary phone interviews, most of the "kinder," as they are identified in the film, were cooperative, though at the beginning many displayed a puzzling hesitancy.

"There was a sense among them that they had suffered so little compared to those who had perished in or survived concentration camps, that it wasn't appropriate to talk about their own experiences," says Oppenheimer.

In the same vein, the former kinder do not accept the appellation of "Holocaust survivors," describing themselves as "evacuees."

Two years ago, Mark Jonathan Harris, who won an Oscar for his documentary about Holocaust survivors called "The Long Way Home," came aboard, though he was initially reluctant to commit to the project as writer and director.

"I had done two films on the postwar Jewish experience recently and suffered from a kind of Holocaust exhaustion," he says. "I knew little about the Kindertransport, but once I looked into it, I realized it wouldn't be a Holocaust film. It really touches on the universal themes of parents and children, their separation

and memories, and, above all, the amazing resiliency of children."

Oppenheimer and Harris faced the reality that their window of opportunity for making the film was constantly narrowing. Most of the former evacuees were now in their late 60s and 70s, and more were dying with each passing year.

During the summer of 1999, when the Kindertransport Association met for its 60-year reunion, the filming of "Strangers" began in earnest. After winnowing some 300 contacts, 23 were selected for in-depth interviews, of whom 16 appear in the completed 117-minute documentary.

Even after the passage of so many decades, during which the one-time kinder established careers, founded families and became grandparents, the anguish and dislocation of their childhoods still throb like fresh scars.

Lory Cahn, at 14, was set to leave on a Kindertransport from Breslau in 1939. The train pulled out and her father, a disabled war veteran unable to bear the separation from his daughter, pulled Lory through the window of the slowly moving train and onto the platform. Lory later survived Theresienstadt and Auschwitz. Her parents didn't.

Hedy Epstein couldn't fathom why her parents wanted to send her to England. "A few days before I was to leave, I accused my parents of trying to get rid of me," she recalls.

Once admitted into England, the children were strangers in a strange land.

Some found loving foster parents, who scrimped to feed an extra mouth, but others were exploited as maids. Some were housed in baronial estates, others in freezing holding camps waiting to be adopted at weekly "cattle market" inspections.

Some knocked on strange doors, begging the residents to employ a mother and father as cook and gardener, so that they could escape from Hitler. Others became "parents" to younger siblings.

When the boys reached 16, they were arrested as "enemy aliens" in 1940 and deported on harrowing voyages to Australia through submarine-infested waters. Most returned to England a year or so later to serve in the British armed forces.

Whatever hidden scars inflicted by their childhood experiences, practically all the kinder grew up to lead productive and full lives. Two went on to win Nobel Prizes in the sciences.

Sadly, no other country followed England's humanitarian example.

A bill was introduced into Congress in April 1939 to admit 20,000 "German refugee children" into the United States. The anti-immigration lobby swung into action and one legislator argued sanctimoniously that separating children from their parents was against the laws of God. The bill died in committee.

The documentary opens with an intriguing montage of artifacts familiar to any German schoolchild of the late 1930s. There is a pen with nib and inkwell, crayons, report cards and the conical cardboard bag filled with candy and given to 6-year-olds on their first school day.

Equally authentic and haunting are the songs that every German schoolchild, past or present, learns at his mother's knee, from "Little Hans Went Alone Into the Wide World" to "If I Were a Little Bird ... I Would Fly to You."

The narrator for "Strangers" is British actress Dame Judi Dench, selected by Oppenheimer for her "gentle, caring voice, the voice of a mother." □