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84th Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Weeklong Taba talks end

Israel and the Palestinian Authority ended a week of peace talks at the Egyptian Red Sea resort of Taba.

At the end of talks Saturday, negotiators said the two sides had "never been closer" to an accord. Officials also said they hoped to resume talks after Israel's Feb. 6 election for prime minister. [Page 3]

Europe holds Shoah memorials

Britain and Italy held their first-ever Holocaust memorial days Saturday. Shoah commemorations — marked annually on the anniversary of the Jan. 27, 1945, liberation of Auschwitz by Allied forces — also were held in other countries, including Sweden, Lithuania, Germany and Poland. [Page 4]

Barak: I won't work under Sharon

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak said he would not serve as defense minister in a unity government led by opposition leader Ariel Sharon. Barak said over the weekend that he expects to win the Feb. 6 election for prime minister but, should he lose, he has no place in what he described as the far-right government he would expect Sharon to form.

Recent opinion polls in three Israeli newspapers gave double-digit leads to Sharon.

Sharon suffered campaign setbacks last week, but the polls still predict a wide margin of victory for the 72-year-old former general.

Strike strands Israeli travelers

Flights in and out of Israel were canceled because of a strike called by public workers seeking higher wages. Hundreds of passengers were stranded at Ben-Gurion Airport on Sunday because of the strike. Now in its second week, the strike also has closed government offices and affected garbage pickups and train service in Israel.

Palestinians cite 'Protocols'

The official newspaper of the Palestinian Authority alluded to the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, the notorious anti-Semitic forgery, as "proof" that Israel is trying to control the international media.

A Jan. 25 article in the daily Al-Hayat Al-Jadidah also said, "Morale and psychological manipulation has a significant place in the minds of Jews."

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

After communism and Chernobyl, Belarus Jews struggle for rebirth

By Niki Austin

MOGHILEV, Belarus (JTA) — Victor Shpuntov struggled to find the words in English.

He had not spoken the language since his school days some 20 years ago, and his frustration was showing.

"I understand about being Jewish," Shpuntov eventually stammered.

An engineer from Moghilev, a town in southern Belarus, Shpuntov was talking about Leon Uris' book "Exodus," which someone had given him five years ago.

His wife, mother and daughter — three generations of Shpuntovs — sat around the table listening proudly to Victor.

Although they do not understand English, they understood the sentiments reflected in Victor's face.

Shpuntov's story is not uncommon.

He grew up during the Communist era, but it is only since Belarus gained independence in 1991 that Shpuntov and other Belarussian Jews have been allowed to develop a cultural and religious identity.

The town of Moghilev is situated in what was once the Pale of Settlement, the Jewish heartland between the Baltic and Black seas where Jews were confined by czarist edict.

Today, however, it has been almost emptied of Jews through emigration in the first half of the 20th century, decimation during the Holocaust and renewed emigration since the fall of communism.

Only some 3,500 Jews remain in Moghilev — which is about 1 percent of the total population.

Endemic anti-Semitism at the state level does not help the situation.

Authorities refuse to return former synagogues to the Jewish community, and Moghilev's Jewish cemetery has repeatedly been desecrated.

The remaining members of the Jewish community walk past the remnants of their architectural heritage — which now serve as leisure centers — and can only imagine their past.

Politically isolated since 1991, Belarus currently is governed by a hard-line former Communist, President Alexander Lukashenko.

He doesn't have many Jewish backers. Among his strongest critics is the Union of Councils for Soviet Jews, which regularly releases reports on human rights and the status of Jews in the former Soviet Union.

Nevertheless, Moghilev's Jewish community is slowly reviving its traditions. Several days before Victor Shpuntov's interview with JTA, the family attended the first Shabbat service held in Moghilev in seven decades, organized by a British charity, Jewish Chernobyl Children, an organization that works to help Jewish children living in the areas affected by the 1986 nuclear disaster in nearby Ukraine.

It was an unfamiliar and odd situation for the hundred or so people who gathered on that cold Saturday morning in the main hall of the Moghilev Cultural Center in the heart of town.

For most, it was their first experience of the religion they were born into.

"It relaxes my heart," said one middle-aged woman, tears in her eyes.

A man in his 70s peered through broken spectacles at a cantor reciting a prayer from the stage. "I was 5 when my father prayed at home," he said slowly. "All elderly

MIDEAST FOCUS

Israel to help India quake victims

Israel is sending four cargo planes with medical supplies to victims of last Friday's earthquake in India.

The official death toll stands, so far, at more than 6,000.

Bush calls Barak, talks peace

President Bush called Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak on Saturday and told him the United States wants good ties with Israel and peace in the Middle East based on a "secure Israel," according to a spokeswoman for the White House's National Security Council.

Mary Ellen Countryman also said the 7-minute call was mainly an introductory conversation.

Bush, who spoke with several Arab leaders last week, has not yet called Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat.

Alleged Kahane killers arrested

Israeli security officials arrested six members of a terrorist cell they said was responsible for killing several Israelis, including far-right leader Binyamin Ze'ev Kahane and his wife, Talia, in December.

According to the officials, the six belonged to Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat's Force 17 security service.

The officials say seven more members of the cell are still at large in Palestinian areas.

Grandmother dies of grief

The grandmother of an Israeli teen-ager lured to his murder in Ramallah by a woman he met on the Internet died on the day the family ended the seven-day mourning period for the youth.

The Israeli daily Ma'ariv reported that Ophir Rahum's grandmother collapsed upon learning of her grandson's murder last week and died several hours after the traditional shiva for Rahum ended. She was buried near her grandson.



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people prayed, but the young were scared because it was forbidden. For the rest of my life, I never saw a service again."

Last year, Kim Kuznik learned how to pray at a Jewish center in Minsk. After a lifetime of ignorance, this former "hero of socialist labor" rediscovered his Judaism.

Even the leader of the Jewish community, Vladimir Schlechter, had been a committed Communist.

Ten years ago, he was director of a chemical plant; today he struggles to find a platform for his new, thoroughly revised political beliefs.

"The children are our future," he said, holding a glass of vodka in the air in tribute. "But they have problems, and we need to help them."

The problems he is referring to are not solely ones of Jewish identity and education. There is another, more insidious evil that affects Jews and non-Jews alike in Belarus — environmental pollution.

The meltdown at the Chernobyl nuclear plant in April 1986 is still having a huge impact on the population. Although the Ukrainian government recently closed the plant, restrictions on farming generally go unheeded, spreading radioactivity.

There is widely believed to be a direct correlation between disease rates and time spent in a contaminated area. However, a Jewish doctor explained that it is not a simple matter of geography.

Gennady Karpelev, who works at a radiological center for Chernobyl-related diseases on the outskirts of Moghilev, pointed to a map on the wall.

"Radiation is propagated in a variety of ways," he said.

"A village on one side of the road could have high levels of radiation, and on the other side of the road the situation could be fine. It is now difficult to tell which areas are 'clean' and which are 'dirty.'"

The cumulative effects of radiated produce and water are still being felt. The World Health Organization estimates that over one-third of the children in the Belarussian town of Gomel who were 4 or younger on the day of the Chernobyl disaster can expect to develop thyroid cancer.

In addition, the WHO predicts another 50,000 cases of thyroid cancer in the region in coming years.

A regional deficit of iodine — a vital ingredient for a healthy thyroid — and local chemical factories spewing toxic waste are worsening the situation in Moghilev.

What hope is there for the children of Moghilev?

Vacations abroad, organized by charities, offer one glimmer.

Groups of children spend a month with foster families in different countries, where they are exposed to clean air, water and food. Doctors in Belarus say this can be enough to boost a child's immune system for two years.

Still, many young people are leaving town.

Svieta Feldman, 14, recently diagnosed with Hodgkin's Lymphoma, is moving to Germany.

Although her condition is in remission thanks to drugs supplied from abroad, Feldman's family hopes that a move to Germany will offer the best chance for a healthy life.

With emigration to Israel also an option, the numbers who attend Anna Staraselskaya's cheder, or Jewish primary school, are diminishing.

Staraselskaya accepts the exodus with dignity.

"There is no future for Jewish people in this country," she said sadly. "The process of emigration will continue, and we cannot stop it. However, while Jewish people live here, they must feel they are Jewish."

Those who survived the evils of the 20th century in Moghilev are now the torchbearers of its Jewish renewal. However, the community here will never regain its size from the days of "the Pale," and it relies for hope on charities such as Jewish Chernobyl Children.

Vida Brumina, a young woman working at the Union of Belarussian Jewish Organizations and Communities in Minsk, speaks with an unexpected maturity.

"We may be free now, but there are still some things left in our mind from Soviet times," she said. "The best place to start renewal is in ourselves." □

Jewish Chernobyl Children can be contacted in Britain by telephone at 44-208-368-7782 or 44-208-209-0031.

JEWISH WORLD

Bush to discuss faith-based plan

Orthodox Jewish leaders plan to meet with President Bush on Monday to discuss his plan to increase partnerships between the federal government and faith-based social service providers.

Bush, who said he intends to create a federal Office of Faith-Based Action, plans to unveil his initiative this week.

Sweden hosts anti-racism meet

Sweden is hosting an international gathering aimed at combating racism.

The Stockholm International Forum on Combating Intolerance, which starts Monday and lasts three days, plans to focus on the spread of far-right hate propaganda via rock music and the Internet.

U.S. official comes under fire

The head of a team working for the U.S.-led commission investigating the causes of the ongoing Middle East violence is under fire after he went to Jerusalem's Temple Mount with a Palestinian escort and without coordinating the visit with the Israeli government.

Israel has said it will no longer work with Larry Pope, a former U.S. ambassador to Chad.

Caucasus olim get new center

Israeli officials recently opened a new absorption center for immigrants from the Caucasus region in the former Soviet Union.

The center, located in the West Bank settlement of Hiranit, includes housing and classrooms.

Some 60 olim from the Caucasus are currently housed in the center, and an additional 120 are expected to arrive soon.

Skater honors Shoah victims

An Italian skater honored victims of the Holocaust on Saturday, the 56th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, by skating her free program at the European Championships to music from the Holocaust epic "Schindler's List."

In deference to Jewish sensitivities, judges asked Vanessa Giunchi to remove a yellow star that was on her costume when she skated the same program in the qualifying round on Wednesday.

U.S. bank settling wartime claims

The third biggest U.S. bank said it will settle claims that it helped the Nazis acquire French bank accounts owned by Jews, as part of the overall accord French banks reached earlier this month with the United States.

J.P. Morgan Chase & Co. agreed to pay \$2.75 million into a restitution fund for Holocaust survivors.

Taba talks end without deal; no more contacts before vote

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — With elections for prime minister barely a week away, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak filled in his Cabinet on the latest round of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.

Israel and the Palestinian Authority on Saturday ended a week of negotiations at the Egyptian Red Sea resort of Taba, with officials from the two sides saying they had "never been closer" to an accord.

Officials from both sides said they were confident an agreement could be reached if negotiations resumed after Israel's Feb. 6 election for prime minister.

On Sunday, a day after the Taba talks ended, Barak briefed his Cabinet.

While he did not reveal extensive details, Barak said Palestinian negotiators for the first time agreed to the existence of Israeli settlements in any final peace accord.

Barak said Sunday the Palestinian team had been willing to let Israel keep clusters of West Bank land containing some 50 percent to 60 percent of the settler population, but Israel stood firm on keeping at least 80 percent of the settlers in place.

"My assessment from the outset had been that the Taba talks would not produce an agreement," Barak told his ministers. "But we had to know how far we could get in negotiations before the elections. We are closer than ever to an agreement with the Palestinians."

Barak confirmed that contacts were under way for him to meet in Stockholm this week with Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat.

But later Sunday, Barak's office issued a statement saying the premier would "not continue with diplomatic contacts with Arafat and his people until after the elections in Israel." The two sides will continue to maintain "security contacts for calming the situation on the ground," the statement said.

On Sunday, Arafat and Israeli Cabinet minister Shimon Peres appeared on a panel at an important economic summit in Davos, Switzerland.

Arafat delivered a blistering condemnation of Israel to an audience that included U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan. Israel is waging "a savage and barbaric war as well as a blatant and fascist military aggression against our Palestinian people," Arafat said, according to Reuters. He also accused Israel of using weapons containing depleted uranium on the Palestinians, something the Israeli army has roundly denied.

Peres, whose opening comments were far more conciliatory, was taken aback by Arafat's attack. "Let's walk the last piece of the road for peace and have it," he implored Arafat. "Your children will be happy and our children will be happy."

Arafat's accusations contrasted sharply with the tone at a joint news conference summing up the six days of negotiations at Taba, at which the heads of the Israeli and Palestinian teams said the sides had held serious discussions but were unable to close the gaps before Israel's elections.

Barak is trailing badly behind Likud Party chairman Ariel Sharon in pre-election polls. Palestinian negotiator Ahmed Karia said the talks would continue after the elections, no matter who wins. But he stressed that the Palestinians would use "all means" to achieve their goals, the terminology Palestinian leaders often use to hint at violence without quite saying it.

The head of the Israeli team, Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami, described the discussions as "fruitful" and said much progress was made in restoring mutual confidence eroded by the past four months of violence.

A joint communique issued by Israel and the Palestinians said the sides would seek to return to the "normal" security situation on the ground.

Despite the declarations, it was unclear just what the talks achieved.

Palestinian officials still spoke of broad gaps on key issues, including Jerusalem, security and refugees.

The joint declaration was assailed by the Israeli opposition. The Likud Party claimed the statement was intended to aid Barak's electoral chances.

Sharon accused Barak of taking "steps that pose a danger to the State of Israel."

Sharon said Sunday that Barak's attempts to forge a peace accord had brought Israel neither peace nor security. Instead, he said, "it brought us a state of fighting." □

Despite critics, Britain marks first Holocaust Memorial Day

By Richard Allen Greene

LONDON (JTA) — Britain's first annual Holocaust Memorial Day was noteworthy not just for the politicians, celebrities, religious leaders and survivors who attended a London ceremony, but also for the bickering in the Jewish community over whether the memorial should be held at all.

Saturday's commemoration — on the anniversary of the Jan. 27, 1945, liberation of Auschwitz by Allied forces — included dozens of smaller events across the country.

Elsewhere in Europe, Italy also held its first-ever Holocaust memorial day on Saturday, and commemorations were held in Sweden, Lithuania, Germany and Poland.

The London event, which was broadcast live on BBC radio and television, featured a candle-lighting by Prince Charles, speeches by Prime Minister Tony Blair and Orthodox Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, and readings by actors Emma Thompson and Sir Ian McKellen.

"What made the Holocaust so frightening was its goal, its unimaginable scale and its wickedness in attempting to use false science to further human destruction," Blair said in his speech.

"The Holocaust was the greatest act of collective evil the world has ever known," he said.

"It is to reaffirm the triumph of good over that evil that we remember it."

The event included references to other recent genocides, with an excerpt from the film "The Killing Fields" about the Khmer Rouge's murderous dictatorship in Cambodia; a song by Rwandan artist Cecile Kayirebwa; and a reading from the diary of Zlata Filipovic, a Bosnian girl whose memoir has been compared to Anne Frank's.

It also featured footage of the liberation of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in 1945 from the BBC archives.

Some Muslim leaders stayed away from the event to protest the Israeli-Palestinian violence in the Middle East.

Some Armenians were angered at their exclusion from the program, although a community leader was invited at the last minute.

Some 1.5 million Armenians were massacred by Turks in 1915-1916, in what some regard as the first modern genocide.

Under pressure from Turkey, which does not admit the atrocity, the British government initially did not invite any Armenians to participate in the ceremonies.

Many municipalities held their own Holocaust commemorations, including Edinburgh, Cardiff, Leeds and many London boroughs.

In addition to broadcasting the London ceremony, the BBC marked the day with a broadcast of the Holocaust epic "Schindler's List" and a controversial documentary specially produced for the day.

The documentary's producer described "Battle for the Holocaust" as a political history of the Holocaust since World War II.

It examines claims by scholars such as Norman Finkelstein, author of "The Holocaust Industry," that contemporary Jewish groups have used the memory of the atrocity to further their own agendas.

Also appearing in the film are Nazi hunter Simon Wiesenthal and former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.

Yet one of the most curious aspects of the commemoration was the debate in the Jewish community — and in the wider British public — about whether the events should take place at all.

Official representatives of the Jewish community welcomed the introduction of an annual commemoration, but there were loud dissenting voices.

Yitzhak Schochet, an Orthodox rabbi from Canada now based in London, questioned why Britain needed to commemorate the Holocaust.

"It seems strange to me that Britain, my adopted homeland, which along with its Allies liberated the death camps and took in tens of thousands of Jewish refugees, should have foisted upon it a National Holocaust Day," Schochet said.

"Why is this country being asked to shoulder guilt for the Holocaust, which belongs elsewhere?" he asked.

Politicians who created the holiday may have had cynical motives, Schochet said.

"I find it troubling that we Jews find it necessary to draw the sympathy of the wider world upon ourselves as we remember our dead," said Schochet, whose mother was a "hidden child" during the Holocaust.

"But more troubling is the apparent need of politicians to embrace this Jewish suffering as if it were their own."

Jonathan Romain, a leading Reform rabbi, said last week he initially had opposed a national Holocaust memorial day, but "now that it's going ahead, I reluctantly support it."

"It was very hard, when the government solicited comments two years ago, to say 'No thank you, we don't want it,'" he said.

But Romain, like Schochet, said he thought the day was wrongly named.

"It should have a more inclusive name," he said. "If it is to be celebrated by the wider world, it shouldn't be rooted in one particular group's tragedy."

"Who is this day for?" he asked.

"The Jews don't need it; we have Yom Hashoah. Schools don't need it; they have Anne Frank Day. The UK doesn't need it; they have Remembrance Day."

The general public also joined the debate about what, exactly, the day commemorates.

The right-wing Daily Telegraph newspaper, among the largest in Britain, vociferously condemned the commemorations.

"A special day to commemorate the Nazis' 6 million Jewish victims was a bad idea in the first place," the paper said.

It dismissed the Labor Government's rationale for the event, saying that using it to promote political tolerance, ethnic inclusivity and cultural diversity "is to belittle the enormity of what happened, to help bolster Labor's spurious claim that Britain is riddled with racism."

But Holocaust Memorial Day also had its defenders, including David Cesarani, professor of modern Jewish history at Southampton University and a member of the Holocaust Memorial Day steering group.

The very fact that the commemoration generated controversy proved that it serves a purpose, he said.

"The debate about Armenians is a perfect illustration of how the day has created the possibility of discussing events of the 20th century," he said.

"The day recognizes that Britain is a country made up of ethnic and faith groups, most of whom are here because they came as refugees," Cesarani said. "Britain is saying, 'Your history is part of our history.'" □