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85th Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Powell: 'Road map' postponed

The U.S. "road map" toward Middle East peace will not be unveiled until after next month's Israeli election, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell said.

"Because of the number of issues that are before the Israeli public right now, we think it would be wiser in this instance for us to continue work on a road map and wait until after the Israeli election is over," Powell said Wednesday after a meeting with E.U. leaders.

Though such a move had been expected, Powell's statement was the first time a U.S. official has said so explicitly.

Hamas official defiant

A Hamas official said a U.S. indictment issued against him, his wife and five others is baseless. "These are political rather than legal measures addressed against Arabs and Muslims in the United States," Mousa Mohammed Abu Marzook told The Associated Press on Thursday.

They were all charged with having fund-raising ties to Hamas and the Holy Land Foundation, a charity closed last year after the Treasury Department claimed it funneled funds to Hamas.

The five other men are brothers, four of whom were arrested Wednesday in Texas by federal anti-terrorism agents. Marzook's wife is a cousin of the five brothers.

Marzook spent two years in a New York jail as a suspected terrorist before being deported to Jordan in May 1997.

Former congressman dies

The body of a former U.S. congressman who was a longtime advocate for Middle East peace was found on a Tel Aviv beach Wednesday night.

A U.S. State Department official said it appeared that Wayne Owens, 65, died of natural causes.

The former Democratic congressman from Utah helped start the Washington-based Center for Middle East Peace and Economic Cooperation.

Owens founded the center in 1989 with S. Daniel Abraham, the chairman of Slim-Fast Foods and the head of the Abraham Fund.

Owens was in the region on business, The Associated Press reported.

He is survived by his wife, five children and 14 grandchildren.

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Jews answer age-old query: What to do at Christmastime?

By Joe Berkofsky

NEW YORK (JTA) — Sharon Glassman was just another nice Jewish girl who wanted to experience Christmas.

Tipped off by a friend, she trekked to New York City's main post office seeking Operation Santa Claus, the annual campaign drawing letters from needy kids and families hoping for a Christmas present.

She took three letters, bought the requested toy castle, down jacket and football, then wrapped the gifts and sent them off with a note ostensibly from St. Nick.

Glassman, raised as a "twice-a-year" Conservative Jew, had embarked on her mission as a "tzedakah Santa," propelled by the Torah's commandment to do acts of loving kindness.

Six years later she's touring nationally with a new book, "Love Santa: A Different Kind of Christmas Story," about her annual campaign to convince others to follow suit.

"I would not have been comfortable trying to mimic a tradition that wasn't mine," Glassman says.

Faced with the annual dilemma of what to do during the Christmas season, American Jews increasingly are creating new annual celebrations that meld Jewish culture with the birth of Jesus.

From serving dinners at homeless shelters to prowling "Matzo Ball" singles events to noshing Chinese food at a Jewish comedy revue, Jews are "proclaiming their identity by creating new cultural traditions" for Christmas, according to Rabbi Joshua Plaut.

Plaut, executive director of the Center for Jewish History in New York, is analyzing these reactions for a doctoral dissertation he hopes to publish as a "nonjudgmental" book about how Jews handle Christmas.

"American Jews are part of the majority culture every day of the year, but on Christmas Eve they suddenly become excluded," Plaut says. "They're not invited to the big Christmas party."

The Jewish response is born of two major impulses: the desire to fit in and the need to take a Jewish stand, Plaut says.

Those reactions evolved dramatically in the past century. In the 1920s, songwriter Irving Berlin — born Israel Baline, son of a shochet, or ritual slaughterer, from Russia — penned the hit "White Christmas." It was representative of a generation of immigrant Jews in the arts and business who packaged "a secular version of holiday cheer" for the marketplace, Plaut says.

Asked how a Jew could write a Christmas song, Berlin is said to have remarked, "I wrote it as an American," Plaut says.

One prominent non-Jewish children's author even removed religion from the holiday. Theodore Geisel, known as Dr. Seuss, wrote "How the Grinch Stole Christmas," a generic story about giving that "strips Christianity from Christmas," Plaut says.

Christmas also has produced what Plaut calls "the Christmas Yid" — the Jew who performs mitzvot in part to help Christians who are off celebrating.

That model — later updated on "Saturday Night Live" as Chanukah Harry — first emerged in the 1880s, when members of the Washington Hebrew Congregation gave toys to needy Christian children. By the 1920s, Jews were volunteering for vital army and civil service jobs, helping in hospitals and even serving hams in soup kitchens.

In New England, members of some 70 congregations from all denominations sing

MIDEAST FOCUS

Palestinian girl killed in Gaza

An 11-year-old Palestinian girl was killed Thursday in Gaza's Rafah refugee camp. Relatives said the girl was shot by Israeli soldiers. The army said it had no information about the girl, adding that a patrol had exchanged fire with Palestinian gunmen in the area.

Hebron outpost dismantled

Israeli troops removed some 200 settlers from an illegal outpost in Hebron on Thursday.

Army bulldozers razed the outpost, erected near the site of a Nov. 15 ambush in which Palestinian gunmen killed 12 Israeli troops and civilian security personnel.

At least six settlers were arrested Thursday for allegedly fighting with police and soldiers.

Attorney general: Ban Arab party

Israel's attorney general asked the Central Elections Committee to bar an Arab political party from participating in the Jan. 28 elections.

Elyakim Rubinstein said the leader of the National Democratic Alliance, legislator Azmi Beshara, has made remarks supporting Palestinian terrorism. Beshara claims Rubinstein is mixing inappropriately in Israeli politics.

Amnesty backs Israeli reservists

Amnesty International protested the treatment of Israeli soldiers and reservists jailed for refusing to serve in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The London-based human rights group said in a statement that it had written to Israel's defense minister to protest that soldiers who commit human rights violations in the territories are not being brought to justice, while those who refuse to commit such violations are imprisoned, a French news agency reported Thursday.



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carols, do arts-and-crafts projects and help in hospitals, shelters and nursing homes as part of the Synagogue Council of Massachusetts' Project Ezra.

Such efforts, like Glassman's, reflect "the Christmas mitzvah of doing good deeds for one's neighbors," Plaut says. "It's people justifying their behavior on Christmas Day with Jewish reasons."

New Jewish rituals are evolving as well. The sight of Jews taking refuge in Chinese restaurants has become so commonplace as to become a cliché.

One Jew who put a comic spin on that line is comedian Lisa Geduldig of San Francisco. A decade ago, Geduldig was booked at a Chinese eatery in October. She joked about doing a similar show on Christmas as an antidote to "getting Merry Christmas'd to death."

So Geduldig threw together a comedy show at a restaurant in San Francisco's Chinatown, calling it "Kung Pao Kosher Comedy."

The show grew, moved to bigger Chinese restaurants and won such headliners as "Seinfeld" writer Carol Leifer and the king of one-liners, Henny Youngman.

One year, a comic asked the audience, "When the millionth person says 'Merry Christmas' to you, don't you feel like replying, 'F— You?'" Geduldig says.

That material grows from a "subversive tendency" of feeling overwhelmed by and angry about Christmas, Plaut says — a condition he dubs "Claus-trophobia."

The Kung Pao comedy grew so big that Geduldig took her show on the road to Los Angeles, and plans a New York version next December.

This year the San Francisco show features four days of Jewish comics. Organizers sold 3,000 tickets for a dinner-comedy show featuring Jewish comics, prawns and fortune cookies with Yiddish proverbs.

In keeping with the tzedakah tradition, Kung Pao also has raised \$40,000 for various charities, Geduldig says.

But there are plenty of other Christmas options for wandering Jews.

The Forward last week filled a half page with "Noisy Night" events on Christmas Eve in New York.

The action ranges from a Zamir Chorale sing-along to Jewsapalooza at the hip Knitting Factory club. Jewsapalooza features new-wave klezmer and a songwriter series that has spawned hits such as "Chanukah with Monica," "What I Like About Jew" and "It's No Fun to Be a Jew at Christmas."

Elsewhere, Israeli dances and singles events like the Matzo Ball have spawned some 19 shmoozefests, including Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Dallas, Las Vegas, Miami and San Francisco. New York's drew 3,000 party-goers in 2002 alone.

Jewish museums nationwide remain open on Christmas and often attract their largest crowds of the year.

For example, the center for Jewish History's Yeshiva University Museum is featuring a "Winter Spectacular" with an art opening, a concert by the Jewish boy band "The Hamsa Boys" and craft workshops.

While the center usually gets 300-500 people for an opening, Plaut expects 600-900 on Christmas Day. Many observant Jews simply stay in. They have built a tradition of "Nittelnacht" — the night of no learning — which centers around games such as cards or chess, Plaut says.

Unlike some American Jews, many Orthodox Jews simply "don't feel threatened" by Christmas "because they are secure in their own identity," Plaut says.

Yet today, he adds, most American Jews "feel secure enough" as a minority that "they use the Christmas holiday to express their own Jewishness." □

Nobel writer to visit Buchenwald

BUDAPEST (JTA) — The Hungarian Jewish writer who won this year's Nobel Prize for Literature will visit the concentration camp where he was held during World War II.

In addition to his visit to Buchenwald next month, Imre Kertesz also plans to visit Israel and the United States. Kertesz, who won the prize for his Holocaust novels, was officially invited during a ceremony Thursday at the Israeli Embassy in Budapest. In addition, Rep. Tom Lantos (D-Calif.), himself a Holocaust survivor, recently visited Budapest and invited Kertesz to come to the United States. □

JEWISH WORLD

N.J. poet gets new post

After coming under fire for writing a poem insinuating that Jews were behind the Sept. 11 attacks, New Jersey's poet laureate was appointed to the same position in the Newark school district.

The appointment of Amiri Baraka, announced Nov. 26, was criticized by Jewish groups, who learned of the development this week. The United Jewish Communities of MetroWest called the district's recognition of Baraka "highly inappropriate" and a "terrible misuse of the Newark public school system." The Associated Press reported Thursday.

Mitzna seeking D.C. meetings

The leader of Israel's Labor Party is trying to line up meetings with Bush administration officials in Washington.

White House officials have denied Amram Mitzna a meeting with President Bush, but have offered a meeting with State Department officials, UPI reported. Mitzna is reportedly saying he will not come to Washington unless he can meet with National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice.

Illinois invests in Israel Bonds

The state of Illinois invested \$10 million in Israel Bonds. State officials attended a ceremony in Jerusalem at which a symbolic check was turned over.

Also present were Israeli Finance Minister Silvan Shalom and Israel Bonds President Joshua Matza. Matza called the investment a vote of confidence in Israel's future economic development.

Italy backs Israel in E.U.

Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi reportedly told visiting Israeli Foreign Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that he favors Israel's eventual entrance into the European Union.

Following their meeting Wednesday evening, Netanyahu told reporters that Israel "does not have a better friend in Europe than Berlusconi. As far as our country is concerned, it is a special friendship."

Group seeks immigration reform

The American Jewish Committee is calling for reform of U.S. immigration policy.

A statement issued Wednesday by the group's Board of Governors said reform is needed to increase the security of U.S. borders following the Sept. 11 terror attacks.

"We continue to support fair and generous immigration policies as fundamentally good for the United States and consistent with Jewish values," the statement said. "At the same time, we recognize the urgent need for reform of our visa, border and admissions systems."

Iranian Jews held in detention as part of roundup across U.S.

By Tom Tugend

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — Los Angeles' Iranian Jewish community is joining area Muslims in accusing the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service of mistreatment during a federally mandated registration of certain immigrants.

The Iranian Jews, together with a much larger number of Muslims from Iran, Iraq, Lybia, Sudan and Syria, were detained during a national registration process of those temporarily residing in the United States.

"We know of some Iranian-born Jews who are being held under subhuman conditions, even worse than those found in Third World countries," said Sam Kermanian, the usually low-key secretary-general of the Iranian American Jewish Federation in Los Angeles.

Other human rights advocates compared the situation to the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II.

The registration, part of a U.S. attempt to track Middle Eastern men living in the United States, ended Monday.

Sources in the Iranian Jewish community said up to a dozen community members had been detained or arrested, though attorney Beck Saffary said he was trying to raise bail of \$1,500 per person for 35 Iranian Jews.

There are some 30,000 Iranian Jews and more than 500,000 Iranian Muslims in Southern California. A large protest rally was held Wednesday afternoon, organized by a Farsi-language radio station.

Mainstream Iranian Jewish organizations did not participate, but a relatively unknown group, Persian Jews United, joined the protest.

Eight of the Jewish detainees apparently emigrated from Iran to Israel and later came to the United States, and many hold Israeli citizenship.

Zvi Vapni, the Israeli deputy consul general in Los Angeles, said he had received complaints of "very hard conditions," perhaps due to overcrowding, and had conveyed the consulate's concern to the INS.

A spokesman for the U.S. Department of Justice denied the charges of mistreatment.

Calling the charges "preposterous" and saying they weren't backed by evidence, Jorge Martinez said the law mandates the detention of persons in the United States illegally.

With some 10,000 men required to register nationwide, Martinez said some detention rooms "may have been a little crowded," but said any incidents "have been blown way out of proportion."

Complaints had been received only in Los Angeles and Boston, Martinez said.

Bitva Yaghoubian said that her uncle, a 45-year old businessman with a wife and two children, had reported to the downtown federal building because he had not yet completed the process to obtain a green card.

"He was arrested like a criminal," Yaghoubian said. "They taped his wrists and ankles, put him in a room with the air conditioning way up, with no blankets or mattress."

Yaghoubian also reported terrible sanitary conditions and very little food, which the uncle, who keeps kosher, declined.

Yaghoubian said her family put up the \$1,500 bail on Monday, but the uncle still was being held on Wednesday.

Some fear that if any of the Jewish detainees are deported, they might be returned to their native Iran.

"I understand the need for vigilance, but they are jailing some people because they overstayed their visa for a few days maybe 20 years ago," Kermanian said. "That's not justified."

Rep. Henry Waxman (D-Calif.), speaking from his Washington office, charged that "the INS has really messed up. They are using a sledgehammer approach and jeopardizing the goal of tracking visa holders."

Waxman said he has protested to the INS, but had not yet received a response.

The Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles also expressed its concern. □

Presidents Conference rejects two left-wing groups; some claim bias

By Rachel Pomerance

NEW YORK (JTA) — The umbrella group of American Jewry is under fire from several member organizations over its rejection of two prospective members.

On Tuesday night, Meretz USA and the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association were denied membership in the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

Several members are now blasting the vote. Some claim the conference's membership standards are unfair; others say the left-leaning groups were rejected because, they claim, the supposedly neutral conference actually leans to the right.

"I think the conference" leadership "really doesn't want us on board," said Charney Bromberg, executive director of Meretz USA, which is affiliated with the left-wing Meretz Party in Israel.

Conference leaders say ideology played no role in either the negative recommendation from the conference's membership committee or the eventual vote by the full conference.

"None of the leadership has a vote in the committee or the conference," one conference leader said. "The political issues never once came up in the discussions of the committee," and the final vote was not along party lines.

The committee recommended rejecting Meretz USA because its budget and membership were deemed too small for the Conference of Presidents.

Yet several groups said the vote shows the need for updated, more uniform membership standards.

A seat on the conference means membership in the representative body of American Jewry, which takes policy positions on major issues of Jewish concern and advocates for those issues in Washington and abroad.

Membership is determined by a variety of factors, including organizational structure, purpose and size.

On Wednesday, Stephen Wolnek, chair of the conference's membership committee, told JTA that final results showed that Meretz's application was rejected by a vote of 15 in favor and 16 against, with three abstentions.

The RRA received 31 votes in favor, with two against and one abstention, Wolnek said.

Thirty-four votes in favor are necessary to be accepted into the conference.

The Labor Zionist Alliance initially challenged the vote, saying it did not appear that the meeting had the necessary quorum of 34 organizations. However, the group accepted the results of a conference inquiry that showed more than 34 organizations on hand Tuesday, though not all cast votes.

The results of the vote will be officially announced at the membership committee's next meeting, slated for the summer.

Tuesday's vote marked the first time in three years that the conference voted on new members.

The vote was taken after the membership committee formally recommended endorsing the RRA's bid for adjunct membership, which gives a group access to certain events but no voting rights.

Meretz USA first applied for membership nearly five years ago, according to Bromberg, and Tuesday was its chance to appeal earlier rejections. Meretz USA is a public advocacy and educa-

tional organization promoting civil rights in Israel and a two-state solution to the conflict with the Palestinians.

The membership committee is composed of a dozen Jewish leaders representing a broad slice of the conference — whose 52 members span the gamut of Jewish political and religious affiliation — but some left-wing groups say Tuesday's vote was partisan.

One conference leader denied any ideological bias.

While committee members voted against Meretz, most voted for the left-leaning RRA — so "how can you say it's political?" he asked. Conference members appeared especially shocked that the RRA's application had been rejected.

"In my opinion, there was no reason for them not to be accepted," Wolnek said.

"All I can really say is the committee recommended their acceptance, but they didn't get enough votes. I know that sounds trite, but that's really what it's all about."

The RRA's executive director, Rabbi Richard Hirsh of Philadelphia, said he had not yet received an official response to the RRA's application, which was first presented in 1999.

"I wouldn't have a clue what would be the reasoning" for being rejected, he said.

For many conference members, Tuesday night's vote highlighted membership standards that they consider unfair. Several member groups are comparable in size to Meretz but have even less influence, conference members said.

"Either it will be an organization of major Jewish organizations with a definition on which we will all agree, or not," said Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations.

"Meretz, in comparison to many other members of the conference, absolutely has a right to be represented there," he said.

However, Morton Klein, president of the Zionist Organization of America, said that Meretz "is so tiny, with only a couple of employees, that it would really make a mockery of the claim that this is a conference of major organizations."

Meanwhile, Wolnek said the close vote on the RRA made him "uncomfortable," and he encouraged the group to reapply. □

Budapest to get Holocaust center

BUDAPEST (JTA) — Groundbreaking took place here this week for Hungary's first Holocaust museum and education center.

The center, to be built at an estimated cost of \$13 million, is expected to be completed in April 2004, according to the president of the foundation establishing the center, Tibor Vamos.

The museum, he said, will include a memorial to those who perished in the Holocaust.

The opening will coincide with the 60th anniversary of the deportation of 600,000 Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz, he added.

Hungary's Jewish community is Central Europe's largest, with an estimated 80,000 to 100,000 members.

Roughly 550,000 Hungarian Jews perished in the Holocaust. Among those attending Monday's groundbreaking ceremony was Hungarian Prime Minister Peter Medgyessy.

"The Holocaust is our tragedy, and it is our responsibility to face the past," he said at the ceremony.

The Holocaust museum will be housed in a renovated 19th-century synagogue that used to accommodate 1,700 worshipers, but which has not been used for nearly 20 years. □