

IN THE NEWS

Israel to bring in 20,000 Falash Mura

Israel will accept the Falash Mura still in Ethiopia, Israel's foreign minister said.

Speaking during a visit Thursday to Addis Ababa, Silvan Shalom told reporters that the estimated 20,000 Falash Mura, Ethiopians of Jewish origin who had converted to Christianity but are returning to their Jewish roots, would begin immigrating to Israel next week.

But Shalom's Ethiopian counterpart, Seyoum Mesfin, said the move should not take the form of a mass exodus. Falash Mura in Israel have accused the Absorption Ministry of stalling on immigration for their kinsmen.

Qurei: Palestinians may go binational

Palestinians may abandon the idea of a two-state solution, Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei said.

Qurei told Reuters on Thursday that if Prime Minister Ariel Sharon goes ahead with his plan to disengage from the Palestinians, the Palestinians would propose a binational state.

Analysts say Qurei's remarks constitute an attempt to counter Sharon's initiative for a universal Israeli withdrawal from the disputed territories if Palestinians do not crack down on terrorism.

Terror casualties down in Israel in 2003

Fifty percent fewer Israelis were killed in terrorist attacks in 2003, according to a government report.

The report issued Thursday by the Shin Bet security service said 213 Israelis died in Palestinian attacks in 2003, compared to 451 in 2002.

There also was a 30 percent decrease in the number of attacks, which security sources attributed to more formidable military crackdowns and the success of the West Bank separation fence.

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WORLD REPORT

PUBLISHED WEEKDAYS BY JTA—THE GLOBAL NEWS SERVICE OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE • WWW.JTA.ORG



Eric J. Salmon

Gov. Howard Dean, the Democratic front-runner, campaigns at a Des Moines, Iowa, synagogue. Democrats are strategizing how to retain their traditional edge in the Jewish community.

Worried that Jews will vote Bush, Democrats plan counterstrategy

By RON KAMPEAS

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Worried by signs of President Bush's soaring popularity among Jews, Democrats launched a coordinated campaign 18 months ago to win back Jewish votes.

In recent interviews with the JTA, top Democrats who attended the meetings disclosed the secret strategy sessions for the first time.

The campaign has three prongs, according to senior Democratic operatives who were involved in its formulation: Stress the Democratic Party's commitment to Israel and raise questions about Bush's own commitment; remind Jewish voters they are much likelier to favor Democratic positions on domestic issues, and

marginalize Democrats who alienate Jews.

Ann Lewis, the Jewish former director of communications for the Clinton administration, attended a series of meetings of top Democrats in spring 2002 to discuss what they saw as a deteriorating situation with Jewish voters.

The trigger was a May 5, 2002, "Solidarity with Israel" vote in Congress that drew 21 nay votes — including 18 from Democrats.

"Our discussions following the vote showed we were not as proactive as we should have been" with Jewish voters, Lewis recalled.

The congressional vote wasn't the only issue, however. It was becoming clear that Bush was gearing up for war with Iraq and

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■ *Concerned about Bush, Democrats adopted plan to woo Jewish support*

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that most Democratic legislators were less than enthusiastic about the prospect.

In town-hall type meetings, Jewish community officials said, it became evident that Jewish Americans saw Saddam Hussein's potential downfall as a blessing for Israel and wondered why the Democrats weren't on board.

"We were becoming aware of a string of political argument on the other side, which was that people who disagreed with the war on Iraq were somehow soft on terrorism or less reliable on America being a friend of Israel," Lewis said.

The outreach initiative to the Jewish community was seen as a way to counter aggressive new Republican tactics to undermine traditional Jewish financial support for the Democrats.

"The politics were ratcheted up," said a senior Democratic leadership aide.

Some at the Democratic strategy meetings worried that Jews believed the party was taking the community for granted because of its overwhelming support in previous elections.

That notion was reinforced by exit polls after the 2002 midterm elections, which showed a return to Reagan-era numbers when Jews voted Democratic by a 2-1 margin, not the 5-1 or 6-1 ratios of the Clinton era.

The exit polls had unreliably small

Democrats became 'more explicit' in support of Israel.

Ann Lewis
Democratic adviser

samples, but Democrats were rattled.

"What we've done since then is to be much more conscious of outreach to the Jewish community," Lewis said, as well as "much more explicit" in support for Israel.

Since then, Democratic Whip Steny Hoyer of Maryland has taken the lead in reaching out to the Jewish

community. His campaign keeps a list of 15 pro-Israel actions Hoyer has taken since March 2003, such as leading a delegation of 29 Democratic legislators to the Jewish state in August.

"We needed to articulate our case. I wanted to articulate our values," Hoyer told JTA.

The senior leadership aide said it was a matter not of reformulating strategy, but of reminding Jewish voters where Democrats stand.

That meant, first of all, allowing little light between the Democrats and Israel. One of Hoyer's first tasks as whip was to retake the Israel solidarity vote. He did so on June 25, and this time it passed the House by a vote of 399-5.

In a speech last month to the America Israel Public Affairs Committee, Hoyer said the group of legislators went to Israel in August "to express solidarity with Israel's cause — freedom and democracy — as well as her determination to survive and succeed as a sanctuary for the Jewish people."

The primary lesson of the trip, Hoyer told AIPAC, was that the West Bank security barrier, "which has engendered great controversy, is viewed by Democrats as a reasonable and acceptable attempt to reduce terrorist attacks."

Hoyer is at the lead of a group of Democrats who have blasted Bush for criticizing the route of the security fence approved by Israel's government. Bush has made clear he wants the West Bank fence to adhere more or less to the pre-1967 boundary between Israel and Jordan.

Hoyer said he plans to be even more vociferous about Bush's linking of the fence to loan guarantees for Israel.

Taking such shots at a president who calls Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon a "man of peace" might seem like folly, but Democrats believe Bush is becoming vulnerable.

"Right now, this administration is perceived as very pro-Israel, but that could change," said Mark Mellman, a top Democratic pollster. He cited pressure over the security fence as well as the administration's insistence on adherence to the U.S.-led "road map" peace plan, which many in the pro-Israel community consider moribund.

Ira Forman, executive director of the National Jewish Democratic Council, attended the spring 2002 strategy meetings. He says there are signs Bush may well get tough with Israel in a second term, when he doesn't have to worry about re-election.

Another pressure point is Bush's perceived warmth toward Saudi Arabia. Virtually every Democratic candidate for president has called for greater scrutiny of the Saudi royal family and its role in the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

Lewis raised the issue in her own speech to the AIPAC annual meeting last month.

Republicans say they're eager for a fight on Israel and the Middle East.

"The president and this party are significantly head-and-shoulders above anyone running on the Democratic side right now" when it comes to Israel, said Matt Brooks, executive director of the Republican Jewish Coalition.

Stories about Bush family ties to the Saudis or threats that Bush will emulate his father's coolness toward Israel won't work, Brooks said. "That's the same thing they tried to scare the Jewish community with in 2000," he said. "There is not one leader in the Jewish community who believes that."

Some Democrats indeed are wary of tackling Bush on the Middle East, and say it's enough to tell Jewish voters that Democrats share Bush's commitment to the Jewish state.

"Democrats don't have to be better than Republicans on Israel, they just have to be as good," said Steve Rabinowitz, a Democratic political adviser who attended the spring 2002 meetings. "So long as Democrats are competitive, it invariably shifts to domestic issues, where we beat them hands down."

There is little reluctance, however, in challenging the Bush administration on domestic issues, a key element of the strategy to emerge from the spring 2002 meetings.

JTA **WORLD** **REPORT**

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JTA WORLD REPORT is published five days a week, except holidays by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency Inc., 330 Seventh Ave., New York, N.Y. 10001-5010. For more 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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Israeli tourists flocking to Cuba

By LARRY LUXNER

HAVANA (JTA) — Israel and Cuba haven't had diplomatic relations since 1973, but that hasn't stopped thousands of Israelis from touring the Caribbean island.

"We assume that at least 10,000 Israelis have already visited Cuba," said Daniel Faians, president and CEO of Polaris Group, a large travel wholesaler and airline agent based in Tel Aviv.

Overall traffic from Israel to Latin America is estimated at 80,000 per year, of which half are limited-budget mochileros, or backpackers, Faians said. "But those who go to Cuba aren't mochileros," he said. "They stay in deluxe hotels and travel in private cars with private guides."

Faians, who spoke to JTA from Tel Aviv, said "Israelis by nature are very inquisitive and are always looking for new destinations. Cuba appeals to the Israeli market because it's something new and unusual."

Cuba is almost never sold as a single destination, but usually is combined with a Central American country like Costa Rica or Guatemala, with tourists spending one

week in each place, Faians said.

Israelis generally pay \$1,000 to \$1,500 for a seven-day tour of Cuba. That includes accommodations at four- and five-star hotels but excludes airfare.

Faians said his agency pushes the main attractions — Havana, Trinidad and Santiago de Cuba — but often directs his clients to spend their last two nights in Varadero, so they can at least see what a Caribbean beach destination is like.

Unlike their European or Canadian counterparts, "Israelis don't visit Cuba as a vacation destination, and they generally don't go to the beaches. If they want that, they can go to Turkey, which is a lot cheaper and closer," Faians said. "They're looking for the cultural experience."

Anti-Semitism is not a problem, and there's no personal hostility toward Israel in Cuba — despite the lack of diplomatic ties, the Cuban regime's friendship with the Arab world and its position equating Zionism with racism.

"The Cuban people don't know much about Israel and the current situation in the Middle East, so they just see us as other tourists, like Germans or Spaniards,"

Faians said. "And we don't have any problems with the authorities. If you arrive with an Israeli passport, you get the same treatment as anybody else."

Faians avoids involvement with Israeli investors in Cuba. Currently, the biggest Israeli investor is Tel Aviv-based Grupo BM, which is behind an 18-building office complex in Miramar, a once-wealthy suburb of Havana. The \$200 million project, known as the Miramar Trade Center, is managed locally by an entity registered in Panama. The company's chief is Enrique Rottenberg, an Argentine Jew living in Havana.

Rottenberg refused to talk about BM's activities.

According to an official pamphlet, the project is being built in five phases and should be done by 2008. Dozens of Cuban state-run trading companies, foreign firms and embassies already have offices in the center, which is adorned with Israeli art.

One thing is certain: The Miramar Trade Center won't be on the must-see list for Israeli tourists — or any tourists, for that matter. Only people who have official business there are allowed in.

Historic Cuban hotel caters to Jewish visitors

By LARRY LUXNER

HAVANA (JTA) — Care for an authentic Cuban mojito at the L'chaim bar? How about Israeli salad, matzah-ball soup and cheese blintzes?

They're all now on the menu at the Hotel Raquel, Cuba's first boutique hotel catering specifically to Jewish tourists.

Richly illustrated passages from the Bible cover the walls of the small but elegant property, located in what was once a thriving Jewish neighborhood of Old Havana.

The 25-room hotel originally was built as a bank in 1908, when thousands of poor Jews from Eastern Europe, Turkey and Syria were immigrating to Cuba.

After the 1959 revolution that brought Fidel Castro to power, nearly all of the Jews fled to the United States and elsewhere. Today, 1,300 Jews live in Cuba, most in Havana.

For many years, the structure housing the Raquel was used as a warehouse and

fabric depot. Now, its eclectic architecture and romantic Art Nouveau interiors — all refurbished — have made the Raquel a jewel in the crown of Habaguanex S.A., the state entity charged with fixing up Old Havana's hotels and restaurants.

The hotel is located six blocks from Congregacion Adat Israel, Cuba's oldest shul.

General Manager Jose Manuel Quesada said that since the Raquel's inauguration in June, it has become popular with Spanish tourists as well as Americans circumventing the U.S. ban on travel to Cuba.

He expects the occupancy rate to reach 80 to 85 percent this winter, thanks to an influx of visitors from France, Germany and Great Britain.

In addition to American Jews, the Raquel clearly hopes to attract tourists from Israel. Though Castro broke off relations with the Jewish state in 1973, tour operators in Tel Aviv estimate that at least 10,000 Israelis have visited Cuba.

Near the Raquel is a kosher butcher shop and a bakery. Some Jewish families still live in the vicinity.

Eusebio Leal Spengler, director of Habaguanex and Havana's official historian, said the revival of Jewish culture at the Hotel Raquel is a long process. "We have built a place of harmony in a Havana neighborhood that respects the best traditions of the Jewish people, members of a community that live in Cuba together with citizens of other beliefs," he said.

The Jewish touch seems to be everywhere in the building, with rooms on the second floor named after biblical matriarchs. First-floor rooms have names like David and Solomon. It's likely the only hotel in Cuba whose phone system plays the theme song from "Schindler's List" when callers must be placed on hold.

Four ornate chandeliers patterned after Stars of David hang in the lobby, while contemporary paintings by Cuban Jewish artist Jose Farinis hang on the walls.

Wesley Clark: The perennial outsider

By RON KAMPEAS

BOCA RATON, Fla., (JTA) — Wesley Clark pats the yarmulke on his head, telling congregants of Temple Emeth, "It feels really good to be here and to wear this."

Then, with unbridled enthusiasm, he stuns the room by explaining why he became a Roman Catholic.

Gen. Clark, the Reagan voter running as a Democrat, the soldier who waged diplomacy, the peacemaker who loves a good scrap, enjoys nothing better than confounding expectations.

He is doing just that by creeping up through the ranks of nine Democratic presidential candidates to reach second in polls in some states, and raising enough cash to keep him comfortable till April.

The latecomer, whose candidacy some dismissed as a vanity bid, now is jockeying with Rep. Richard Gephardt of Missouri as the likeliest candidate to challenge front-runner Howard Dean.

Jewish supporters say Clark is best positioned to stanch what some fear might be a massive Jewish defection to President Bush's camp in November 2004. Clark's solid pro-Israel pronouncements and history in uniform, they say, are the best Democratic bet against Bush's tough-on-terror image and his rapport with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

While there are no poll numbers identifying the level of Jewish support for individual candidates, Clark has had successful fund-raisers among Jewish supporters in New York, California, Florida and Chicago.

One New York City fund-raiser with Jewish supporters in October netted over \$1 million for the campaign, a Clark spokesman said.

"There wasn't a candidate that could beat Bush until Clark," says Michael Hoffman, a Chicago Web designer who started Jews for Clark. "He has a niche. Some of the other candidates, especially Dean, worry a lot of people, especially when it comes to fighting terrorism."

Clark reportedly is President Clinton's anointed favorite: Two of Clark's top campaign advisers, Eli Segal and Ron Klain, are Jewish veterans of the Clinton administration.

Yet Clark carefully has cultivated his image as an outsider, priding himself on never having held political office. That

has led some to dismiss Clark as a political lightweight. But supporters say it's key to understanding the candidate's rise.

"Most of us like Clark because he was not a politician," says Denyse Rackel of Cleveland, who founded Women for Clark.

Clark links his outsider status at least tangentially to his Jewish background. His Jewish father, Benjamin Kanne, died in 1948, when Clark was 4. Within months, his non-Jewish mother, Veneta, moved back to her hometown of Little Rock, Ark, from Chicago.

Clark was a stranger in Little Rock and says that at first he was miserable, distinguished by his Chicago accent and his unusual last name, Kanne (pronounced KAY-nee, and apparently a variation of Cohen).

His mother feared that Clark's Jewish background would compound his alienation — so she never told him about it.

"We were Austrian, she kept on saying," Clark recalled in a recent interview with JTA.

Clark said his mother told him, "I don't know much about your father's family. We never talked much about it."

When Clark was 24 and he found out about his Jewish connection — through his father's relatives, who contacted him while he was studying in England — he confronted his mother. She broke down crying, he said.

Compounding the alienation he felt in Little Rock were Clark's early memories of the warm embrace of his extended Jewish family in Chicago.

"His first four years, there was a lot of warmth," recalls his cousin Harriet Salk, who is 16 years Clark's senior. "We used to all get together Friday afternoon. Men would play pinochle, women would sit and talk."

Clark still retains memories of the Friday gatherings at his grandmother's apartment.

"I was the baby there. I was the baby of the cousins," he says. "I remember being in my grandmother's house, I remember the big salami that hung in the closet, she had a piano that people played, she had a candy

dish — I liked the candy dish. And I remember the grown-ups talked."

Clark's father, described by Salk as a "tall, imposing man," died of a heart attack on a Friday evening after one such gathering.

Despite his ignorance of his own background, Clark's sense of himself as an outsider sparked an affinity for Little Rock's Jews. An accomplished swimmer, the teenaged Clark preferred a summer job as a lifeguard at the Jewish country club to the same job at the country club that barred Jews.

Clark acknowledges that he has a contrarian, mischievous streak. He got into fights as a boy, and in high school, he says, "I did some of the usual prankish things."

He also was driven. Jay Heyman, a classmate at Hall High School in Little Rock, remembers that by age 14 Clark already was talking of going to West Point.

"Even when there was nothing going on, he was busy at work with books, while those of us less academically inclined might have been socializing," says Heyman, now a Reform rabbi in San Francisco. "I had no idea at the time of his Jewish background, but he might have been a yeshiva bucher in terms of his intensity."

Clark rose rapidly in the military following a tour in Vietnam, where he won a Purple Heart for leading his men to safety after he had been shot.

In his early 30s, Clark served a stint as a White House adviser in the Ford administration and, after a number of command positions, was responsible by 1994 for worldwide strategic military planning for the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He was promoted to NATO chief in 1997.

Even now, his energy level is so high that he's active nonstop, says Jeanette Schnurmacher, a Jewish community official in Broward County, Fla., who has hosted Clark several times for speaking engagements.

After he returned to Little Rock as a private citizen in 2000, Clark started doing paid speaking engagements about his experiences as NATO commander. He also joined the Stephens Group, an investment outfit.

In Israel, 'the action of building a fence can actually promote negotiations.'

Gen. Wesley Clark

His 2001 lecture in Broward County was one of Clark's first speeches, and Schnurmacher recommended him to other Jewish federations. Clark ran the circuit, talking of his Jewish background and peppering his talk with references to the Torah.

"Every federation would call back and say, 'What a spectacular speaker,'" Schnurmacher says.

Jewish family members say Clark has great interest in his provenance and is always digging for more information about his ancestors — though the information hasn't altered his spiritual orientation.

"He's very warm, very family-conscious," Salk says.

Clark invited all his Jewish cousins to the recent wedding of his son, in Little Rock. Another cousin, Barry Kanne, has researched Clark's Jewish family tree for him.

The first time Kanne and Clark met, around 1990, "we talked about family," Kanne told JTA.

Clark recently visited his father's grave in Chicago. He also was close to his stepfather, Victor Clark.

"I was very proud when I learned the story of my father's family," Clark said. "I was enthralled. I was very, very happy about it. It was like a new world had opened in front of me."

Each time he speaks to a Jewish audience, Clark mentions his father, Benjamin Kanne, a corporate lawyer in Chicago who once employed Richard Daley, the future mayor. Kanne attended a Reform synagogue and was a member of the Jewish Veterans of America.

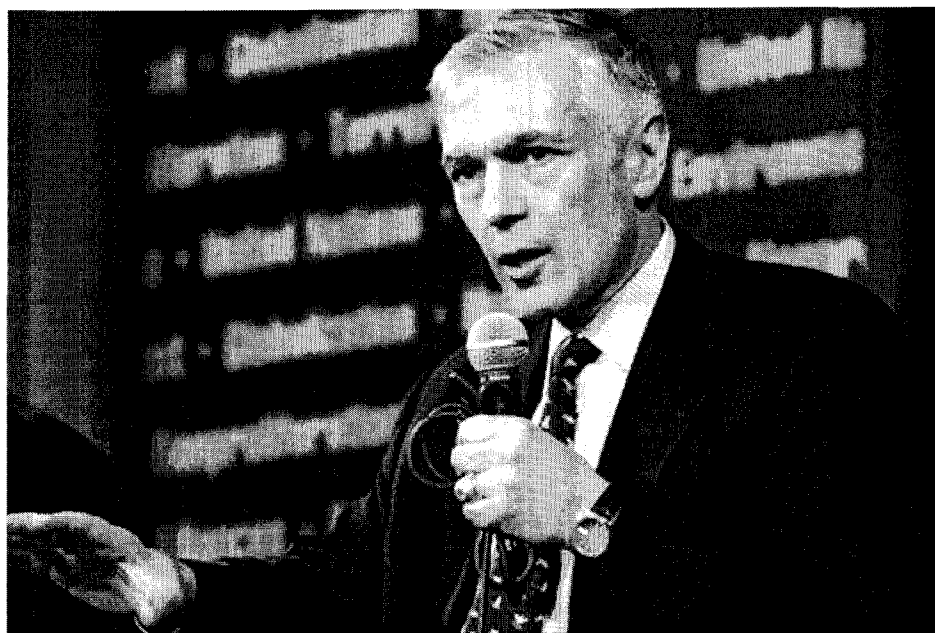
"He had three loves other than his family," Clark recently told the audience at Temple Emeth, in Boca Raton. "He loved politics, he loved pinochle and he loved horses. He never made any money."

Clark's talk of his Jewish background somehow turned into why he converted from Baptist to Catholic. At Oxford, where he studied as a Rhodes scholar, Clark told the congregation, he met a Catholic priest who had been an officer in the Cold Stream guards, an elite British army unit.

"He fought in World War II, he really knew where things were," Clark said, "and so I decided I would convert to Catholicism."

The congregation greeted the revelation with stunned silence.

The moment was typical of Clark, who has the intellectual's tendency to work thoroughly through the topic of discussion. Since he had started with his Jewish



Leadership for America, Inc.

Gen. Wesley Clark, now running for president, discovered his Jewish roots in his 20s.

background, it seemed perfectly natural to explain his Catholicism.

Clark's refusal to reduce his message to aphorisms is precisely what appeals to many supporters. "He was a breath of fresh air," Esther Messinger, a local retiree, said after the event in Boca Raton. "He combines the intellectual background with military experience."

Clark clearly relishes his reputation as a warrior-intellectual even though, he says, he was marked for hostile treatment by others in the military after he won his Rhodes scholarship out of West Point, in 1968.

But even four-star generals have to take orders, and Clark's tendency to leapfrog the command structure sometimes got him into serious trouble.

Most notably, as NATO commander during the Kosovo crisis in the late 1990s, he allied himself with two civilians — U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and the top U.S. envoy to the Balkans, Richard Holbrooke — in advocating for military intervention. That relationship sidelined Clark's direct superiors, including Defense Secretary William Cohen, who, despite a successful mission in Kosovo, engineered Clark's firing in 1999.

Clark says the day he learned he was being fired was the worst in his life.

Clark acknowledges that he broke rank but says he had a higher duty as a soldier, since the Pentagon's reluctance to act against Yugoslav strongman Slobodan Milosevic was immoral.

"When I watched Slobodan Milosevic beginning a program of ethnic cleansing

in the Balkans again, I blew the whistle. I said we have to stop it, and we are going to stop it," Clark said.

Clark says he admires other soldiers who break out of "following-orders" mode and has singled out Israelis for mention.

He has expressed support for Lt. Gen. Moshe Ya'alon, Israel's army chief of staff, who recently angered Israel's prime minister by saying that the Jewish state is hindering peace through its tough military measures, and four former Israeli spy bosses who have said Israel needs to work harder to make peace.

Like the other Democratic candidates, Clark says Bush failed Israel when he reduced the U.S. role in the Middle East peace process during the first year and a half of his presidency.

Based on his experience in Yugoslavia, Clark envisions a multilateral approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, saying that increased involvement by neighboring Arab states would give them a stake in making the peace process a success. He also sees NATO troops policing the peace much further down the line.

Clark's main Israel message is that the Jewish state has a right to defend itself, and he blames the Palestinians for initiating the violence of the past three years.

"The Israeli government has a duty to defend its people from the constant onslaught of bombers who attack innocent civilians on buses, in restaurants and on their way home from prayer," he wrote in the *Forward* recently. "As a retired general, I firmly believe that this is the least that any society expects of its leadership."

Porn scandal reverberates at Prague school

By MAGNUS BENNETT

PRAGUE (JTA) — "I feel I'm a victim of Jewish politics in Prague," Vera Dvorakova says as she sits in a downtown Prague cafe, nervously toying with a cup of coffee.

Dismissed as the principal of the city's Lauder school in November after revealing the existence of pornography on the school's Internet server, Dvorakova's recent interview with JTA was the first time she discussed her turbulent six months as principal of the Czech Republic's only Jewish school.

Dvorakova, who was head of the Jewish community's secretarial services department until her appointment as principal last May, was removed from her post in a narrow vote by the community's representative board, ostensibly because of her handling of the pornography scandal.

She was criticized for firing Petr Karas, who was acting principal when the extreme and "deviant" pornography, as Dvorakova describes it, was downloaded from the Internet to the school server from December 2002.

Prague police said this week that they are still investigating who was responsible for downloading the material and whether a crime was committed. Karas has been reinstated as a teacher by the new acting principal, Katerina Dejmalova, a newcomer to the school who led a teachers' strike to force Dvorakova's ouster.

Dvorakova says she felt obliged to talk to the Jewish press to counter "lies" spread about Karas' dismissal.

"As leader of the school, Mr. Karas took no steps to destroy this data and investigate why this data had appeared at the school. That is why he was dismissed," she says.

Karas told JTA last week that he had not known about the pornography and that a former Internet administrator at the school had admitted responsibility for downloading it.

"I was blamed for it and painted in black," he said, "but I didn't know anything about it."

Dvorakova says Karas must have been aware of the material because a huge amount of images and videos were downloaded.

She says she is devastated by her dismissal.

"The principal who found deviant pornography was dismissed, and nobody has been punished for downloading it," she says. "What do you think about that?"

She says the porn find was only an excuse used by disaffected teachers and those with vested interests in the Jewish community board, which runs the school, to take over the establishment and install their own people to run it.

Dejmalova, the new principal, denied that protests by teachers and students were aimed at Dvorakova.

"They were protesting against the way Mr. Karas was dismissed," she said. "He was a very serious and excellent teacher and was liked. Mrs. Dvorakova made a fatal mistake" in dismissing him.

Dvorakova, however, says the campaign against her started long before the porn find.

"There have been so many lies told since I started at the Lauder school," she says.

Dvorakova was offered a teaching post at the school after her dismissal.

But she is taking sick leave until she feels well enough emotionally to decide her future.

"After just four days, anonymous letters were sent questioning my education and skills," she says, though she has 20 years experience as a teacher. "Then, some of the teachers started helping students to distribute the letters. People started to call me a secretary, suggesting I was not fit to run the school."

Dvorakova also notes that other principals had been chased out by teachers and students, including Karas' predecessor, who resigned in November 2002 after just 48 hours on the job.

Dvorakova, the school's eighth principal in the span of just a few school sessions, also is angry that Karas' father, who sits on the community board, was not asked to recuse himself from the vote deciding her future.

Jewish community chairman Tomas Jelinek said a report by state inspectors who visited the school recently "showed no irregularities during Mrs. Dvorakova's tenure, and even found some improve-

ments during her brief time at the school."

Jelinek said he was disappointed that the board had not been able to find a compromise regarding Dvorakova's position. He also said he is particularly concerned that those who led the revolt are running the school.

"This is unfortunate for the institution. From the very beginning Mrs. Dvorakova was facing opposition from a faction of teachers, and these teachers were pressing the board," he said. "I personally expect that

this kind of revolt will happen again in the future because those people behind it know that if they push the board, they will get whatever they want."

Leo Pavlat, adviser to the Lauder Foundation in Prague, which co-sponsors the school, said the focus should remain firmly on educational issues.

"This is a very unfortunate case that caused damage both to the Jewish schools in Prague and to the Jewish community of Prague," he said. "The Ronald S. Lauder Foundation strongly supports Jewish education. This is its main goal that must always be at the forefront of attention, over and above personnel and other problems."

But Dvorakova says the real reason for her dismissal lies in opposition within the Jewish community to a reform process — both in the school and in the wider community — launched by Jelinek.

"There is a group of people who think the community belongs to them and they are not willing to accept any changes, or accept anyone else who isn't in their group," she said.

Jelinek faces a challenge to his leadership in the spring. But Pavlat, a member of the community's leadership, said that the unrest at the school was not part of any wider crisis in the community.

On the contrary, he said only "a temporary commotion was caused by the situation at the school. These days, however, I have all reason to believe the leadership of the Jewish community of Prague has overcome the recent difficult situation and is prepared to fully cooperate in the future."

Dvorakova says the real reason she was fired was not the porn, but opposition to community reform.

FIRST PERSON

It's tough to admit, but life in Israel can be scary

By JONATHAN UDREN

JERUSALEM (JTA) — "Aren't you scared to ride the bus?" asks Charlotte, a family friend visiting from Orlando, Fla.

It's a question I'm used to by now. So I give my routine answer: "You just do it. I have to get around, it's too expensive to get cabs everywhere. Plus," I add, "there are thousands of buses that arrive safely at their destination every day. It's not as bad as it seems in the media."

I deliver my statement with a brave face, explaining how riding the buses and sitting in cafes is my own way of saying that I will not let terrorists stop me from living my life.

For a moment I pretend that in the six months that I've lived here, I've overcome my petty fears. But unfortunately, it's not true, and I must admit that. It's often difficult to feel at ease in Jerusalem.

Sometimes, I'll start to settle into my seat on the No. 18 bus from Ben Yehuda Street, or find a little comfort sipping tea with a friend in a cafe. Suddenly, a pedestrian with a bulky coat will trigger that dizzy feeling in my stomach, making me sit up nervously in my chair.

But it's a feeling that doesn't last long.

The strength of the Israelis helps me push ahead with my own life.

On a Friday afternoon coming back from the market before Shabbat, the bus bustles with people pushing, laughing, and talking. There is no tension in the air, only excitement for Shabbat and a burning desire to get home.

I walk past Sbarro, the site of a terror bombing back in August 2001. The line for pizza and pasta is long, and the seats are almost all taken. There is a small memorial in the front of the building, but otherwise, no one would know.

For a second, I wonder if Israelis survive by forgetting. Despite the pain and the fear, everyone still pushes forward. It's as if they're all trying to tell the world and each other: "We are not only dying here in Israel, we are living too."

In Argentina, unplanned babies at bottom of economy

By FLORENCIA ARBISER

BUENOS AIRES (JTA) — It's tough being a parent these days in cash-strapped Argentina. But it can be even tougher being an unplanned baby.

Growing up, Johanna Klas, 21, was used to private schools, private health insurance and a comfortable middle-class life. But after Argentina's economy collapsed at the end of 2001, Klas and her family fell into poverty.

Her parents lost their jobs, the family had a home mortgage to pay and the young Klas and her two siblings began going to Jewish welfare groups for their daily meals.

Then Klas learned that her life would change forever: She was pregnant with an unplanned baby, due Feb. 11. Now she has to worry about getting enough nourishment for her baby, both during her pregnancy and after.

Klas is not unique among Argentine Jews. The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, which provides many of the welfare services for Argentine Jews, says babies and pregnant mothers are among the most vulnerable of the country's Jews.

Approximately 35,000 of Argentina's roughly 200,000 Jews receive JDC support in Argentina; of them, 803 babies under 3 years of age and 98 pregnant women live below the poverty line.

Faced with the possibility of undernourishment, these women and their children are the target of a new JDC program called Baby Help.

"Now that the storm seems to be over," Alejandro Kladniew, the local JDC official, said of Argentina's slowly improving economic situation, "we are focusing on the most vulnerable cases."

The new Baby Help program is meant to do just that, with an estimated budget of \$330,000 for 2004.

"We wish to assure a safe upbringing for these babies," Viviana Bendersky, Baby Help's coordinator, told JTA.

In Buenos Aires, an entire floor of a

local Jewish organization has been remodeled to serve as Baby Help's central offices. The new space serves as a meeting place for parents, pediatric experts and early-stimulation workshops to benefit babies.

At the Baby Help center, donated clothes, strollers, bassinets and baby tubs fill the room, waiting for poverty-stricken mothers who need them.

Bendersky says many parents do not know how to stimulate their babies through play, perhaps because of the grim reality they face trying to provide for their children.

In August, Baby Help distributed to parents its first "Baby Help bugs," kits filled with food, vitamins, educational brochures and medicines.

In October the group launched a vaccination program, providing hepatitis and chicken-pox shots, which public hospitals do not provide.

Baby Help officials say they also expect to be able

to pay three months worth of day-care fees for babies whose parents have jobs.

The program held a Chanukah party for babies and their young parents on Monday. The group also has held 15 different celebrations for new babies over the last four months.

One of the next celebrations scheduled is a brit milah in February for Klas' expected son.

"We want to give our baby a Jewish education," Klas said, speaking of herself and her boyfriend, Gregorio Remesnitzky, 21, the baby's father.

Meanwhile, the couple cannot afford to move in together to provide a home for the baby. The \$70 a month that Remesnitzky earns as a computer technician goes to pay the bill for the private hospital where the couple plans to have the baby.

"The precarious conditions of public hospitals really terrified me," Klas said, explaining her use of a private hospital.

Klas is one of two pregnant women and 31 babies benefiting from the Baby Help program through the Sephardi Israeli Community Association of Buenos Aires.

'We are focusing on the most vulnerable cases.'

Alejandro Kladniew
JDC official

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

Turkey: Assad serious about peace

Syrian President Bashar Assad is serious about renewing peace talks with Israel, Turkey's prime minister said. Recip Tayyip Erdogan made his comments to Israel's ambassador to Turkey on Thursday after Erdogan met with Assad earlier in the week. Erdogan also reportedly offered to mediate Israeli-Syrian talks.

Powell wants Palestinian action

Colin Powell called on the Palestinian Authority to take "more responsible action" to rein in terrorism.

Speaking at a news conference in Washington on Thursday, the U.S. secretary of state said Palestinian commitment to ending violence and terrorism would lead the United States to move forward on the "road map" peace plan.

He also said recent plans announced by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon should be seen as suggestions in case Israel does not have a reliable partner for peace in the Palestinians. William Burns, assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, will pressure Egypt and other Arab states to work with P.A. Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei and not P.A. President Yasser Arafat, Powell said.

Deadly view

Israeli soldiers guarding a watchtower in the Gaza Strip reportedly killed a Palestinian in his home.

Witnesses said the 42-year-old Rafah resident was killed as he opened a window in his house before dawn Thursday, and that the gunfire came from a watchtower at the nearby Rafiah Yam settlement. The Israeli army said it is investigating the incident.

Report: Terror groups timed attacks

Palestinian terrorist groups time their attacks to derail diplomatic progress, a Palestinian security services report said.

The report details instances in which Hamas and Islamic Jihad launched terrorist bombings with the express purpose of thwarting progress, such as the June 2001 attack on the Dolphinarium disco, in Tel Aviv. That bombing killed 21 and was launched amid efforts to renew Israeli and Palestinian security coordination.

Grass-roots plan gets 250,000 signatures

Some 150,000 Israelis and 100,000 Palestinians endorsed a grass-roots peace plan.

The People's Campaign for Peace and Democracy's "Destination Map" calls for a democratic Palestinian state in the entirety of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. It also calls for the evacuation of Jewish settlements in those areas and the return of Palestinian refugees to the Palestinian state.

The campaign was formed in December 2001 and has collaborated with, among others, the People's Voice for Peace campaign, spearheaded by former Shin Bet chief Ami Ayalon and Palestinian intellectual Sari Nusseibeh.

Israeli teens celebrate Christmas

Students at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem high school celebrated Chanukah with a Christmas theme.

Seniors at the prestigious high school decided to erect a Christmas tree and wear Christmas hats, among other acts, and secured approval from the class council and administration, the Jerusalem Post said. The Christmas theme, which the principal said was meant to honor three Christian students, sparked intense debate among students.

WORLD

French bill submitted

The French government submitted a bill to ban religious insignia in state schools.

Education Minister Luc Ferry said Wednesday that he had presented legislation to ban all conspicuous religious signs, beginning in the next school year. Muslim groups in France and other parts of the world have expressed vigorous opposition to the legislation, but Jewish groups largely have supported it. The legislation is to be examined by a parliamentary constitutional committee and will be presented to the National Assembly at the beginning of February, Ferry said.

Holocaust memoirs coming out

An initiative to plan Holocaust memoirs is yielding its first fruit. The first three volumes of the Holocaust Survivors' Memoirs Project, which receives funding from Random House, will be published in April.

Two more volumes will come out later in the spring. Nearly 1,000 manuscripts have been received since the project was launched in 2001.

Birthright grads get awards

Six graduates of the birthright Israel program were presented with the first annual Charlie Awards.

The awards given Thursday were donated by Lynn Schusterman in honor of her late husband Charles, one of the founders of the birthright program, a project that has brought some 60,000 young Diaspora Jews on free trips to Israel.

"They took the gift of birthright and incorporated it into their daily lives," said Lynn Schusterman, presenting the awards at a ceremony in Jerusalem. "They spread their love of Israel and connection to Israel and spread it to as many people as possible."

NORTH AMERICA

Caretaker of Jewish veterans' graves dies

Kenneth Poch, who spent years cataloguing Jews in Arlington National Cemetery, died at 62. Poch died in Washington on Dec. 27 from Lou Gehrig's Disease, The Washington Post reported this week.

Poch began listing graves of Jewish soldiers 15 years ago after learning the cemetery did not keep track of the number of Jews interred there. He eventually collected about 2,700 names among some 250,000 graves, as well as data about family members. "You're dead only if you're forgotten," Poch once said.

Chicken soup challenge set

The best chicken soup in America will soon simmer to the top. A contest dubbed the "Chicken Soup Challenge" kicked off this week, hatched by the National Jewish Outreach Program of New York.

Chicken-soup cooks should submit recipes to www.njop.org, or via e-mail to soup@njop.org, by Feb. 2. Five finalists selected by celebrity kosher chef Jeffrey Nathan will fly to New York for a "Souper Tuesday" cook-off Feb. 24. The winners will be awarded a trip for two to Israel.

Canada gets new advocacy group

There's a new pro-Jewish and pro-Israel advocacy group in Canada. The Canadian Council for Israel and Jewish Advocacy will coordinate Jewish and Israel advocacy efforts in domestic politics and on campuses.