

IN THE NEWS
Israel to boycott hearing at The Hague

Israel will boycott international hearings on its West Bank security barrier. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's office said Thursday Sharon had decided to accept legal advisers' recommendations not to recognize the International Court of Justice's authority to discuss the matter.

The hearings open Feb. 23.

Rumsfeld defends Israel's nuclear arms

U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld defended Israel's assumed nuclear stockpile.

Speaking at the Munich Conference on Security Policy on Saturday, Rumsfeld suggested Israel needs atomic weapons because it is a small state with a small population.

"It's a democracy and it exists in a neighborhood" whose members have "opined from time to time that they'd prefer it not be there and they'd like it to be put in the sea," Rumsfeld said.

"And Israel has opined that it would prefer not to get put in the sea, and as a result, over a period of decades, it has arranged itself so it hasn't been put in the sea."

Powell to P.A.: Ball is in your court

U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell wants the Palestinians to respond to Israel's plan to withdraw from the Gaza Strip.

Powell told the Senate Thursday that Israeli-Palestinian peace remained of "utmost urgency" to President Bush's administration.

"The Israelis are now making some unilateral moves. We don't want to see a solution that is so unilateral that it doesn't really provide the kind of stability that we're looking for," he said. "But the Palestinians must move, and we've made that clear to them."

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JTA World Report will not publish Monday, Feb. 16.

WORLD REPORT

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James Nubile/JDC

A Jewish victim of Nazism opens her Claims Conference-funded food package in her Ukraine home.

Claims conf. grants questioned as new allocations raise eyebrows

By URIEL HEILMAN

NEW YORK (JTA) — When it comes to who should get the money from the sale of Jewish property in East Germany seized by Nazis during World War II, most agree it should go to the rightful heirs.

But when none can be found — usually because the rightful owners were killed by the Nazis — the money goes to the Claims Conference in New York.

It then gets earmarked for distribution along a split where 80 percent goes to social-welfare organizations that benefit Holocaust survivors and 20 percent goes to "Shoah documentation, education and research."

That has critics wondering where birth-

right israel, which is receiving nearly \$1 million from that money to send youths from the former Soviet Union to Israel, fits in.

A new allocation of \$150,000 to birth-right is just one of the grants in the Claims Conference's \$74 million allocation package from unclaimed assets this season that is raising eyebrows, even among the conference's own board members.

JTA obtained a draft list of the grants, which have been approved by the Claims Conference board but have not yet been publicized.

The allocations from East German properties represent only a fraction of the total restitution money the conference administers annually — about 12 percent of a total of \$800 million in 2002 — and survivors and observers

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ALLOCATING JUSTICE

■ *New grants are raising questions about Claims Conference allocations*

Continued from page 1

applaud most of the group's work.

Yet the process of allocating funds from the unclaimed Jewish assets in East Germany has become a lightning rod for protest.

"Some of the projects are not even Holocaust-related," said Leo Rechter, general secretary of the National Association of Jewish Child Holocaust Survivors. "At a time when there are not sufficient funds to take care of social-service needs like home care, everything that is available should be spent helping Holocaust survivors in their final days."

In the 80-percent category, critics are asking why money intended to benefit Holocaust survivors is being spent on things like capital improvements for Israeli hospitals,

which come from a fund formally called the Successor Organization, is about the 80/20 split that applies to the unclaimed East German assets. Some contend that more of this money should go to benefit survivors. Others point out that because the money comes from the sale of unclaimed Jewish property, it belongs to the Jewish community and all Jews share the right to decide how it is used.

compish two things at once we ought to be doing it: No. 1, the survivors, and if there can be infrastructure aid to Israel after the survivors are gone, all the more power to them," Berman said. "At the same time, at the end of the road Israel has a facility that it can use for a variety of purposes in the future."

A year ago, the president of the Claims Conference, Israel Singer, who also is chairman of the WJC, proposed that unclaimed assets and some monies won from Germany in restitution settlements be used to create a "fund for the Jewish people," dedicated to supporting Jewish education and other causes unrelated to the Holocaust. But that idea was nixed by the Claims Conference board and survivor groups, which argued that Holocaust funds should be used exclusively to benefit survivors and for Holocaust education.

'We feel we're guardians of holy money.'

Gideon Taylor
Claims Conference

The total living population of Jewish victims of Nazism is estimated at between 700,000 and 1.1 million.

Roman Kent, chairman of the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors

and treasurer of the Claims Conference, said, "My fundamental disagreement is about the proportion of 80/20."

But the 80/20 policy, decided upon in 1994, was upheld last July by a unanimous vote of the Claims Conference board. With the first major batch of allocations since that meeting about to be announced, critics are focusing on the substance of the grants.

Critics point to projects that don't fit into either of the allocation categories from unclaimed Jewish property: essential services for survivors or Holocaust education.

Berman defended the allocations for capital-improvement projects in Israel, saying the money allocated for such projects corresponds to the proportion of survivors served by each facility.

For example, the conference is allocating \$29,000 toward the installation of a \$115,000 sprinkler system at Beit Kassif nursing home, in Israel's Kibbutz Kfar Blum, which says 21 of its 80 residents are Nazi victims.

Similarly, the conference says it's allocating \$400,000 to the Hatzolah ambulance service in Brooklyn because a "shockingly high percentage" of its patients are survivors.

Those officials say every program is carefully screened — and then scrutinized once the grant is awarded to ensure that the funds are properly used. Many of the programs included in the \$74 million package may raise eyebrows at first glance, but closer scrutiny shows they are worthwhile and relevant to the Claims Conference's mission, officials said.

"We feel we're guardians of holy money," Taylor said. "We're very scrupulous and careful in how we allocate funds, how we transfer funds and monitor the implementation of the grants."

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to the tune of some \$6 million; the Hatzolah volunteer ambulance corps in Brooklyn; a "community improvement council" in Spring Valley, N.Y., and the installation of sprinkler systems in Israeli nursing homes.

"Supporting Israeli hospitals is a noble and worthy cause, but it takes a leap to argue that it's related to direct assistance to Holocaust survivors," said Elan Steinberg, executive vice president of the World Jewish Congress, which is on the Claims Conference board.

Julius Berman, the chairman of the Claims Conference, said that when it comes to Israel, the conference decided to take a slightly more expansive view.

"There was the feeling that if we can ac-

That, says Steinberg, who backed Singer's proposal, is why he was so upset to learn that some of the \$74 million in grants this season — another \$15 million is expected later this year — is going to projects that don't meet the criteria formally specified by the Claims Conference.

Steinberg pointed specifically to millions of dollars in capital-improvement projects in Israel, including grants to renovate hospitals' internal-medicine departments, outfit nursing homes with new patient beds, install sprinkler systems in senior-care homes and purchase medical equipment.

"I lost the debate on the fund for the Jewish people," Steinberg said. "If you have agreed to this particular policy, then don't turn it into something else without saying you're doing so. I think that goes to the heart not only of integrity, but also to self-respect."

Gideon Taylor, executive vice president of the Claims Conference, says that every allocation in the \$74 million package from unclaimed assets is intensively reviewed.

"A huge amount of thought and consultation and research and analysis goes into these," Taylor said.

For example, Taylor explained, the Claims Conference decided to fund birth-right Israel in exchange for a promise that the money would be used to make sure every participant visiting Israel would undergo Holocaust education programming.

Part of the dispute about the allocations,

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Rabbi, 'messianic Jew' discuss Jesus' death

By DEBORAH PARDO

NEW YORK (JTA) — The murder occurred nearly 2,000 years ago, but the case apparently remains unsolved.

At least that's what one could conclude from the hoopla surrounding actor-director Mel Gibson's upcoming film, "The Passion of the Christ," which many in the Jewish community fear could revive accusations of Jewish culpability for Jesus' death.

On Tuesday, more than 750 Jews and Christians poured into a large room at a Hilton hotel in Manhattan to consider the question of who killed history's most famous Jew.

Unlike two years ago, when Rabbi Shmuley Boteach and Michael Brown, a messianic Jew, argued over Jesus' messianic claims, this time the two panelists kept their tone passionate but amiable, joking and often agreeing with each other.

"This is a Jew-Jew discussion about the most important Jew who ever lived," Brown said in his opening statement.

Brown spent the first five minutes of his presentation condemning the Catholic Church for its history of anti-Semitic persecution sparked by the deicide charge — that Jews killed Jesus and that every generation of Jews throughout history bears responsibility.

Brown chose a more theological perspective that blames Jesus's death on all of humanity, because of its sins.

Christians, who made up a little more than half the audience, responded to many of Brown's assertions with cries of "Amen!"

The debate was sponsored by the Chosen People Ministries, a messianic Jewish group. Boteach thanked the group for not placing restrictions on what he could say.

Boteach began by placing the guilt for Jesus' death on the Romans, and calling on Jews to reclaim Jesus from the gentiles.

"I think it's time to take back Jesus from the anti-Semitic Christians," Boteach said. "He's one of us."

Boteach also expressed admiration for evangelical Christians who support Israel and espouse moral values similar to those of Orthodox Jews.

Boteach said he feared that the bonds

that have developed between Christians and Jews in recent decades will be undone by "The Passion of the Christ," which is set to open in theaters on Feb. 25.

Gibson, who belongs to a fundamentalist Catholic splinter group that rejects the reforms of the Second Vatican Council in 1965 — which repudiated the deicide charge against Jews — has said that he wanted "The Passion" to portray the intense violence of the last 12 hours of Jesus' life.

While Tuesday's debate focused less on the film than on the wider issues separating Jews from so-called messianic Jews — many of whom are actually Christian, not Jewish — both speakers had clear thoughts about the film's potential consequences.

"This is bad for evangelicals because Mel Gibson is closing Jewish hearts to Jesus," Boteach said at a pre-debate press conference.

Many evangelical groups have openly supported "The Passion," hoping it will touch viewers nationwide.

"I think it will be impossible for anybody, Jewish or not, to walk out of a movie theater and not be asking themselves, 'Who is this man Jesus?'" said Kyle Fisk, executive administrator of the National Association of Evangelicals, the largest network of evangelical Christians in North America.

Unlike most Jewish community leaders — who have not been invited to the film's few screenings — Fisk saw two screenings and said he thinks the film will advance rather than hinder Jewish-Christian relations.

Both Brown and Mitch Glaser, president of Chosen People Ministries, admitted that messianic Jews don't completely agree with the evangelicals' positive take on the film.

"Messianic Jews are not quite as enthusiastic as evangelicals, because we

understand the raw nerve that this is touching," Glaser said.

While Glaser said he believes some Jews played a part in Jesus' death, he said problems arose when the death was blamed on all Jews for all time.

Many Jewish groups are concerned that scenes in the film of Jews calling for Jesus' death could ignite new waves of anti-Semitism, similar to the effect of medieval passion plays.

In response to the fears, the Anti-Defamation League asked Gibson to add a postscript to the film denouncing anti-Semitism. A Gibson

spokesman said a postscript would not work cinematically.

The Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations, an umbrella organization for 90 messianic congregations, also released a statement asking Gibson to repudiate Holocaust denial and anti-Semitism, and wants him to include a rider to the film clarifying that only a small number of Jews demanded Jesus' death.

The union's statement said that Jews and Christians will see the film through different lenses.

Christians will likely base their opinions on how closely it hews to the stories of the New Testament, while Jews will evaluate it according to other historical sources.

"I'm with the side of history — and as much as we know, the Jews did not kill Jesus," said Leo Shliselberg, 77, a religious Jew who attended Tuesday's debate.

Shliselberg said he won't watch "The Passion" — or any future Gibson films, for that matter.

Although Boteach has encouraged people to boycott the \$25 million film, both he and Brown plan to see it.

"I can say for a fact that if there's anything that comes out in the way of misunderstanding or anti-Semitic venom from that film, my voice will be as loud as Shmuley's to fight against it, protest it and expose it," Brown said.

The release of "The Passion of the Christ" is bad for evangelicals because Mel Gibson is closing Jewish hearts to Jesus.

Shmuley Boteach

Celebrity rabbi and author

Claims Conf. allocates Jewish money carefully

By **URIEL HEILMAN**

NEW YORK (JTA) — The Claims Conference says it sees itself as a guardian of “holy money” when it comes to funds designated for Holocaust survivors.

Not surprisingly, so does everybody else.

That’s why the debate is so passionate surrounding the Claims Conference’s distribution of hundreds of millions of dollars from the sale of Jewish assets looted by the Nazis in East Germany during World War II.

In contrast to the bulk of funds the conference administers — mostly German money for individual survivors as compensation for Nazi persecution — the allocations from the East German assets are Jewish money.

Proceeds from the sale of these assets — Jewish-owned homes, businesses and synagogues — go to their owners or heirs if they can be identified, while proceeds from unclaimed assets are earmarked for Jewish community projects.

At issue now is the latest batch of allocations from the unclaimed assets in this Successor Organization fund, \$74 million in grants that is divided between social-welfare projects that benefit survivors — constituting 80 percent of the allocations — and “Shoah documentation, education and research” projects, which get 20 percent of the grants.

Every year, the Claims Conference makes about \$90 million in grant allocations from the fund.

The fund was created in 1992 as the legal successor, or heir, to both claimed and unclaimed Jewish properties and assets seized by the Nazis in East Germany. Under the deal negotiated during German reunification, any property that went unclaimed after a German-mandated deadline reverted to the Claims Conference, rather than the successor state to the Third Reich or to postwar non-Jewish owners.

Grant money from the fund is allocated in two annual installments — usually about \$75 million in the winter and about \$15 million in June.

Through the end of 2002, the last year for which data was available, a total of \$451 million was allocated from the Successor Organization to groups along the

80/20 split. An additional \$90 million has been allocated in the past 13 months.

Aside from the grant money, by the end of 2002 about \$260 million had been paid to survivors or heirs with proven claims to properties the Claims Conference had recovered from East Germany.

Another \$157 million was being held at the end of 2002 in a special Goodwill Fund for assets for which people had not yet proven their claims. The deadline for making claims against assets in the Goodwill Fund is this March 31.

The conference also has set aside about \$260 million in the Successor Organization fund for survivors’ long-term needs, a move that has been criticized by some who argue that the conference should give away

its assets as soon as possible because aging survivors need the money now.

In total, the Successor Organization, which includes the Goodwill Fund, has generated proceeds of more than \$1 billion.

Every year, new proceeds are generated by the sale of newly recovered properties in the former East Germany. Though the conference tries to sell the assets soon after it recovers them, its auditors, Ernst & Young, estimated at the end of each of the last two audited years — 2001 and 2002 — that the Successor Organization had about \$100 million worth of property that had not yet been liquidated.

An emerging problem, conference officials say, is that income to the Successor Organization generated by the sale of Holocaust-era Jewish assets is declining just as aging survivors grow more needy. Several recent studies on survivor populations around the world support those claims.

“The needs are not dropping off, but the income is,” said Greg Schneider, chief operating officer of the Claims Conference. “When we don’t have income from the Successor Organization, you can reduce your allocations or begin to draw from” the \$260 million set aside for long-term needs. That’s why they have set aside money for long-term care for survivors, conference officials say.

“There’s people today who don’t need home care, but in 10 years they will,” said Gideon Taylor, executive vice president of

the Claims Conference. “That’s why there was a long-term view taken.”

Others say the Claims Conference shouldn’t be setting aside money when survivors need it today. “With regard to the amount of money being given to certain needs in the Jewish community, we believe some of the funds should be telescoped and front-loaded,” said Israel Singer, president of the Claims Conference and chairman of the World Jewish Congress. “When Holocaust survivors are dying at a rate of 10 to 15 percent per year, we’ve got to move rapidly.”

But the conference board has resisted Singer’s calls, with officials arguing that the group needs to plan for future needs.

Taylor also defends policies and decisions regarding the unclaimed assets divided each year along the 80/20 split.

The bulk of the money goes to groups that feed needy survivors, provide them with medical assistance and improve their living conditions. Allocations are made in 37 countries, with much of the money going to survivors in Israel, the United States, the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

Every application that comes to the Claims Conference undergoes several steps, Taylor says.

First, staff members review the applications and make funding recommendations. Those recommendations then go to experts worldwide for analysis.

The applications then are sent to advisory committees in Israel and the United States, which make recommendations for review by the Claims Conference’s 16-member allocations committee. That committee makes final recommendations to the board.

Twice a year, members of the board vote to approve or reject the allocations package. Critics — including members of the board — say this step is a formality in which members give their rubber-stamp approval to the entire package.

Taylor disagrees, noting the amount of consultation and analysis that goes into the decisions.

Taylor says any controversy over the allocations process is misdirected.

“The question is what is the substance of what we do,” he said. “Are we pushing for money from the Germans for home care or are we not pushing for home care? That’s what people care about.”

‘The needs are not dropping off, but the income is.’

Greg Schneider
Claims Conference COO

Billions of dollars move through claims group

By URIEL HEILMAN

NEW YORK (JTA) — Nearly every part of the Claims Conference's allocations process is closely scrutinized and beset by at least some criticism — but allocations comprise only a small slice of the entire Holocaust-restitution pie.

When it comes to most of the other funds the Claims Conference administers, most Jewish leaders and survivor advocates agree that the Claims Conference does a laudable job.

The conference administers hundreds of millions of dollars each year, most of it payments from the German government to Holocaust survivors.

In 2002, the last year for which records are available, the conference had revenues of \$826 million and made payments of approximately \$765 million.

The conference spends about \$26 million annually on administrative overhead.

Among the funds the Claims Conference administers or manages are:

- **The German slave-labor fund:** Claimants able to prove they were slave laborers under the Nazis are paid \$9,450. They receive two-thirds of that sum immediately, and will receive the remainder once all claims have been processed. The deadline for filing slave-labor claims has passed.

Many beneficiaries of this \$5 billion dollar fund are non-Jews, and the Claims Conference administers only the Jewish portion of the payouts. So far, the conference has distributed more than \$650 million.

- **Swiss banks settlement:** Every Jewish slave-labor claimant also receives a one-time payment from the Swiss banks settlement of about \$1,450. To date, the Claims Conference has distributed more than \$200 million from this fund to former slave laborers.

The conference is consulted but does not administer the balance of this \$1.25 billion fund, which is being overseen by Judge Edward Korman of U.S. Federal Court in Brooklyn. Survivor representatives have gone to court to argue that they are not getting enough of this money. Korman appointed a "special master," Judah Gribetz, to develop a plan for allocating this money.

Korman also asked the Claims Conference to administrator on behalf of the court a 10-year, \$32.6 million program that

provides emergency assistance to needy Holocaust survivors outside the former Soviet Union.

- **Hardship fund:** Victims of Nazism who meet certain persecution-related criteria are eligible for one-time payments from the Claims Conference of about \$3,200. The Hardship fund has paid out more than \$800 million since 1980.

- **Article 2 and Central and Eastern European funds pension-plans:** Jews who meet certain criteria — having been concentration-camp inmates for more than six months, say, or ghetto prisoners for more than 18 months — may receive monthly pension payments from the Claims Conference if they also meet financial-need criteria. The Claims Conference so far has identified about 80,000 Jews eligible for such payments.

- **Successor Organization:** This fund is made up of proceeds from the sale of assets in East Germany originally owned by Jews but seized by the Nazis during World War II. Owners or heirs able to demonstrate ownership of these assets are compensated with the proceeds from their sale. Money from the sale of unclaimed assets is allocated along an 80/20 split where 80 percent goes to social-welfare groups that benefit survivors and 20 percent goes to Holocaust education.

More than \$1 billion has come into this fund since it was created in 1992, and more is added each year. So far, about \$800 million has been allocated or paid out.

- **International Commission on Holocaust Era Insurance Claims:** Headed by former U.S. Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger, this commission helps identify and resolve claims survivors have filed related to unpaid Holocaust-era life-insurance policies. ICHEIC determines the overall allocations. The Claims Conference administers payment of \$132 million over nine years to welfare agencies that benefit survivors, which was set aside from unclaimed, or heirless, insurance policies.

In addition to these funds, the German government has paid more than \$50 billion to Jews worldwide under the original German federal indemnification law, which the Claims Conference helped negotiate in the years after the Holocaust, according to the executive vice president of the conference, Gideon Taylor.



Claims Conference

A Holocaust survivor in Poland receives the flu vaccine through a Claims Conference-funded program.

The Claims Conference was created in 1951 primarily to advocate for compensation and restitution from Germany and Austria. Years later, the World Jewish Restitution Organization was created to advocate for compensation and restitution from other countries complicit in the Holocaust.

To manage the task of administering compensation programs, the Claims Conference employs a staff of 200 in New York to collect data, process claims and administer payments. The staff is in constant touch with researchers at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington and at the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem, who verify claims.

The staff includes historians, data processors, technology experts and claims processors. There are 17 languages spoken fluently among staff members, and employees work in two daily shifts to process claims, the second ending at 2 a.m.

They must work at a furious pace to process as many claims as possible by the deadlines agreed to in settlements between the Claims Conference and European governments.

Some observers have called for the dissolution of the Claims Conference, saying the group should give away all the money it has as quickly as it can and put itself out of business.

But Taylor says the Claims Conference is needed both to ensure that survivors are cared for in coming years, when they will grow more feeble and needy, and to conduct ongoing negotiations with the Germans over additional property restitution and expansion of existing funds.

"You can never have closure with the entity that is the successor of the Third Reich," Taylor said.

As Haiti burns, Jews avoid controversy

By LARRY LUXNER

PETIONVILLE, Haiti (JTA) — At the once-elegant El Rancho Hotel in the hills above Port-au-Prince, aggressive young men peddle exotic African sculptures next to the taxi stand, and colorful Haitian paintings decorate the reception area.

Yet it's hard not to notice the black, wrought-iron menorah smack in the middle of the lobby.

"My father was Jewish," explains manager Elizabeth Silvera, as she sips her coffee in the hotel's nearly-empty restaurant.

Like many members of Haiti's mixed-race elite, Silvera — a practicing Catholic — is proud of her family's tenuous ties to Judaism in a country dominated by Catholicism and voodoo beliefs.

Haiti today has no more than 50 Jews out of a total population of 8.5 million. Most of the Jews who used to live here have fled to the United States, Panama and elsewhere in recent years in the face of crushing poverty and worsening violence.

In the past week, more than 40 people have been killed and hundreds injured in protests aimed at toppling President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

Aristide is a former priest who spent four years in Israel studying theology and speaks six languages, including Hebrew. He already was overthrown once before, in 1991, but returned to the presidency three years later under the protection of U.S. Marines.

Despite Aristide's overwhelming popularity among the 80 percent of Haitians living in abject poverty, charges of corruption and election fraud have tainted his presidency and stalled most of his programs to improve the country's collapsing infrastructure and health-care systems.

The anti-Aristide violence — and the government's equally bloody response to it — have marred Haiti's international image as it marks the 200th anniversary of the slave rebellion that led to its independence from France.

"The country is very poor and there's no business here, so the Jews don't stay long," said David Ades, an intellectual who works in real estate and writes political articles for *Le Nouvelliste*, a daily newspaper in Port-au-Prince.

Ades, 71, is a Sephardi Jew whose father came from Syria and his mother from Egypt. He recently returned to Haiti after

more than 20 years in Brooklyn.

"After my divorce, I figured the best thing for me was to go back to my roots," said Ades, whose two sons still live in New York.

"I was always part of the community, but I never had a Jewish education."

Not much is known about Haiti's Jewish history except that Luis de Torres, the interpreter of Christopher Columbus, was the first Jew to set foot in Haiti, in 1492.

The first Jewish immigrants came to Haiti from Brazil in the 17th century after Haiti was conquered by the French. These Marranos were all murdered or expelled — along with the rest of the white population — during Toussaint L'Ouverture's slave revolt in 1804.

Archaeologists have discovered the remains of a synagogue in Jeremie, a city along Haiti's southern peninsula that was home to many mixed-race families of Jewish origin.

Gaston Michel, a local tourism official in Jacmel who claims Jewish roots, says, "The Jews in Haiti had to hide their Judaism. You couldn't go to school if you weren't Catholic."

By the end of the 19th century, however, Sephardi Jews began arriving from Lebanon, Egypt and Syria.

In 1937, Haitian officials — like their counterparts in the neighboring Dominican Republic — began issuing passports to Eastern European Jews fleeing the Nazis.

Gilbert Bigio, the community's de facto leader, says that at one time as many as 300 Jews lived in Haiti. "Every Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, our house was completely full," recalled Bigio.

Until recently all religious ceremonies were held at his home. But attendance for the High Holidays has gradually dwindled along with Haiti's Jewish population.

"The last Jewish wedding here was my daughter's, eight years ago, and the last brit milah was that of my son, 30 years ago," he says.

Bigio, 68, lives in a big, beautiful house in Petionville, one of the few upscale neighborhoods in Port-au-Prince. Behind the well-guarded house is a luxurious swim-

ming pool and a gazebo for outdoor parties. Like most Jews who remain in Haiti, Bigio is considered extremely wealthy in a country where about 50 percent of the population is illiterate and 76 percent of children under age 5 are underweight or suffer from stunted growth.

"I don't think there is any resentment against people who are rich here," explains the retired businessman, who speaks English, French and Haitian Creole. "If you know how to manage success, people admire you instead of hate you."

Jewish families

helped build Haiti's infrastructure and stayed on during the brutal Duvalier dictatorship, which ended in 1986 when Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier was exiled to France.

"Haiti wasn't always a poor country," Bigio said.

"When Haiti had 3 or 4 million people, everything was beautiful. But between 1950 and today, the population has nearly tripled."

"If most of the Jews left," he added, "it's because they were hoping to live in a developed country, where their children could marry among themselves."

Bigio also is the honorary Israeli consul in Haiti, which explains the enormous Israeli flag in front of his house — as well as his bulletproof Mercedes SUV.

No active synagogue exists in the capital city — home to nearly all of Haiti's Jews — or anywhere else in Haiti. Bigio says Haiti annually imports \$20 million worth of Israeli goods, ranging from telecom equipment to Uzi machine guns.

There's also an organization in Port-au-Prince called Club Shalom formed by Haitians who have studied in Israel, thanks to scholarships provided by Israel.

Bigio declined to discuss politics or offer a Jewish perspective on the current revolt against Aristide.

"Our principle, which we respect daily, is to not mix in Haitian politics," Bigio explained.

"Even after three generations, we are considered foreigners. So we believe that to have good relations with the government, we have to step aside. We take care of business, and let them take care of politics. ■

A tiny, wealthy Jewish community prefers to stay out of the chaotic political turmoil.

FIRST PERSON

Thank God: House shaking was only an earthquake

By BRIAN BLUM

JERUSALEM (JTA) — When the house shook Wednesday morning, I thought: Oh no, not again. Not another cafe blowing up five minutes from where I live.

But the shaking didn't fit the usual pattern. It lasted too long — 20 seconds — and I didn't hear a boom. There was no smoke rising, no sirens in the air.

Within a few minutes, news media already were reporting that an earthquake had hit Israel. Centered just north of the Dead Sea, the quake measured 5 on the Richter scale and could be felt as far away as Jordan and Syria.

No sooner had the momentary panic subsided than I marveled at how ironic our day-to-day reality has become. There are new terror alerts — sometimes hourly, the last two weeks has seen the entire country thrown into chaos by striking local authority workers and the world media continues to vilify us even as anti-Semitism rises to levels not seen since the 1930s.

And now we have earthquakes. What's next? Frogs? Boils? Darkness? How much more do we have to take?

For most Israelis, though, the thought of an earthquake may be a little scary, but it's still more of a novelty. If anything, it's a chance to think about something other than the daily news. My wife Jody and I have a very different outlook on earthquakes than the average Israeli. We both moved to Israel from California — the center of earthquake country.

The last major quake in Israel was in 1927. It registered a sizable 6.3 on the Richter scale and wiped out nearly the entire Jewish quarter of Safed's Old City, in the northern Galilee.

While Wednesday morning's earthquake in Israel was not so dramatic, the geologists warn us here in Israel not to get too complacent. We're due for a Big One, too, they say.

Brian Blum writes the syndicated column "This Normal Life."

In Latin America, Sephardim work to keep traditions alive

By CORRIE MACLAGGAN

MEXICO CITY (JTA) — Assimilation threatens the future of Sephardi Jewish communities in Latin America, leaders of the Sephardi Federation of Latin America said.

"We live in a time when it's easy to assimilate," Rabbi Abraham Tobal of the Mount Sinai Alliance in Mexico City said. "And the ease of assimilation brings the threat of losing tradition."

Of Latin America's 450,000 Jews, about 180,000 are Sephardi, with ancestors from Spain and Portugal who later settled in Syria, North Africa and the Balkans. About 20 percent of the world's Jews are Sephardi; the rest are Ashkenazi, with ancestors from Germany and Eastern Europe. The two groups have different liturgy, religious customs and Hebrew pronunciations.

Tobal made his comments during last week's biennial conference of the Sephardi Federation of Latin America. Some 70 people from around Latin America gathered Feb. 2-5 for the meeting of the Sephardi Federation of Latin America, which is known as FeSeLa.

The organization, founded in 1972 as a part of the World Sephardi Federation, includes members from Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Guatemala, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, Venezuela and the United States.

Rafael Hodara of Uruguay, who on Feb. 5 was elected to a two-year presidency of FeSeLa, said the key to preserving Sephardi culture in the region is incorporating young Sephardi Jews.

"We're going to infuse in each young person a feeling of belonging," said Hodara, who succeeds Isaac Aspani of Mexico as FeSeLa president.

Hodara challenged young people to involve their peers in Sephardi culture — a charge several young FeSeLa members said they're willing to accept.

"It's important to get young people together, to encourage them to get involved," said Isaac Alfie, 28, of Montevideo, Uruguay. "The majority of the people involved

are older, and what will happen when they're not here?"

The meetings took place at the community centers of Mexico's three Sephardi groups: the Mount Sinai Alliance, formed by immigrants from Damascus, Syria; the Magen David Community, formed by immigrants from Aleppo, Syria; and the Sephardi Community, whose members' ancestors came from the Balkans.

Participants said it was a joy to spend time with people who knew the same melodies to Jewish songs, and on several occasions during the conference, participants burst into spontaneous singing.

For these Latin Americans, "Sephardism" is a part of their souls they can't imagine not passing on to their children.

"When I look at Sephardism in its pure essence, it's indescribable with words," said Leon "Ari" Konik of Mexico, a former FeSeLa president, during the conference. "When a grandmother, without knowing

how to read, looks at the stars and says, 'It's the hour of Shabbat,' that's what being Sephardi is about."

Several participants said maintaining Sephardi traditions is something that must be done through education — both at home and in religious institutions.

"The education outside the home is very important because we may not be educating our children well enough at home," said Alberto Levy, whose term as vice president of FeSeLa and president of FeSeLa Mexico ended Feb. 5. "There are more traditions than what we transmit."

Levy and other participants said that not enough rabbis in Latin America are trained in Sephardi customs.

"It's a problem here," Levy said. Latin Americans go to Israel to study, "and when they come back, they make references to Ashkenazi traditions."

Salomon Garazi of Miami, a former FeSeLa president, proposed a program in which rabbis trained in Sephardi traditions would travel to Latin American communities to give workshops. FeSeLa passed a resolution to set the program in motion.

Intermarriage and a lack of rabbis threaten Latin American Jews.

NEWS IN BRIEF

NORTH AMERICA

U.S. backs Gaza pullout

The Bush administration announced its clearest support to date for Ariel Sharon's plan to withdraw from the Gaza Strip.

The United States government seemed to be caught off guard last week by the Israeli prime minister's plan to uproot 17 Gaza settlements; U.S. officials were concerned that the move could undermine prospects for a peace treaty.

After Israel explained the plan, however, administration officials warmed to the idea.

On Wednesday, the State Department said in a statement that "Israeli moves to 'disengage' by removing settlements could reduce friction between Israelis and Palestinians, improve Palestinian freedom of movement, and address some of Israel's responsibilities in moving" toward the vision of peace that President Bush outlined in a June 2002 speech.

Conservative rabbis support fence

Conservative rabbis from around the world approved a resolution supporting Israel's West Bank security barrier.

The resolution passed with an overwhelming majority Thursday at the close of the Conservative movement's annual Rabbinical Assembly, held this year in Jerusalem. The subject of the fence had been one of the most controversial items at the conference, and a revised version passed after a debate over the language.

The final version stressed Israel's right to self-defense while cautioning that Israel should do all it can to "avoid unnecessary hardships to innocent Palestinians" and maintain "the Jewish and democratic character of the state."

In Hawaii with Barak? No, in Iraq!

Hawaii's governor set up a pretend appointment with former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak to cover up her hush-hush visit to Iraq. Linda Lingle, a Republican, joined five other governors this week in an Iraq visit shrouded in secrecy to keep them secure.

Lingle's spokesman announced that the Jewish governor would attend a Pearl Harbor anniversary wreath-laying ceremony Tuesday with Barak; that turned out to be a ploy to throw reporters off. A leading Hawaii newspaper called foul, saying that Lingle and her staff did not need to lie to keep her visit secret.

More Jews in D.C. area

The Jewish population of the greater Washington area has risen during the past 20 years.

There now are 215,000 Jews near the U.S. capital, up from 157,300 in 1983, the Washington Jewish Week reported. The Washington area has the sixth-largest Jewish community in the United States. The area's Jews are the most highly educated in the country, with 85 percent holding at least a bachelor's degree, but are significantly less Jewishly involved than in comparable communities, according to a local demographic study issued Sunday.

MIDDLE EAST

Hamas man killed

Israeli soldiers killed a Hamas fugitive. The army said the man was shot while fleeing arrest in a village near Ramallah on Thursday. Palestinian witnesses said he was unarmed.

Israel gets time on Falash Mura

Israel's High Court of Justice agreed Thursday to give the government more time to bring Falash Mura to Israel from Ethiopia. The

government agreed to verify within the next 90 days those eligible to immigrate. The government will be working off a list of people who claim to be Falash Mura — Ethiopians whose Jewish ancestors converted to Christianity but who now are returning to Judaism.

There are an estimated 20,000 Falash Mura waiting to emigrate from Ethiopia.

The next court hearing on the case will be held in four months.

Landau takes charge at Ha'aretz

English-born journalist David Landau was named editor in chief of Ha'aretz.

Landau is to replace Hanoch Marmari, who resigned last month after a 13-year tenure, the Israeli daily announced Thursday. Landau, 56, was JTA's longtime Jerusalem bureau chief.

Landau began his career at the Jerusalem Post but left after the newspaper was sold to Hollinger International in 1990.

Following a stint at Israel's daily Ma'ariv, he co-founded Ha'aretz's English-language edition in 1993.

Film on Palestinian martyrdom screens

A film about the attraction of martyrdom for Palestinian youth, made by a slain filmmaker, was screened at the Berlin Film Festival. "Death in Gaza," which had its premiere Wednesday, originally was supposed to focus on Israeli youth as well.

But the British cameraman, James Miller, was killed in May 2003 before getting to the Israelis.

Witnesses say Miller was killed by Israeli fire. Israel is investigating the incident.

Such a deal

A private organization is offering cheap tickets for Israelis to protest The Hague's hearing on Israel's security fence.

The organization has arranged for discounted \$188 round-trip tickets for the trip to The Hague, where the International Court of Justice will hear the case Feb. 23.

European Jewish and Christian groups are also planning to protest the hearing, which has been criticized by the United States, European Union and several European countries.

WORLD

AJCommittee opens in Brussels

A leading American Jewish organization opened an office in Brussels. The American Jewish Committee's Translantic Institute opened Thursday and aims to broaden links between U.S. and European Jewish institutions and governments at a time when the Brussels-based European Union is set to expand to include another 10 countries from Central and Eastern Europe.

Speaking shortly after the opening of the institute, the AJCommittee's government and international affairs director, Jason Isaacson, told JTA that "it is necessary to recognize that we need to be on the ground where European decisions are being made which impact the Jewish community."

Switzerland wants fence hearing

Switzerland is calling on the International Court of Justice to rule on the legality of Israel's West Bank security barrier.

Switzerland's Foreign Ministry said this week it had filed a request with the court to examine whether the fence contravened international law and breached the rights of Palestinians.

The United States, the European Union and many European countries have called on The Hague-based court to cancel its Feb. 23 hearing on the fence.