

IN THE NEWS

Egypt presses Hamas on Israel

Egypt called on Hamas to renounce violence and recognize Israel.

Egypt's intelligence chief, Omar Suleiman, said Wednesday that if Hamas does not make these pronouncements, the president of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, is not obligated to ask Hamas to form a government.

Times reporters queried in AIPAC case

U.S. agents questioned two New York Times reporters regarding the American Israel Public Affairs Committee classified-information case.

One of the reporters, David Cloud, was asked about contacts he had with AIPAC in the spring of 2003 when he worked for The Wall Street Journal, the Times reported.

The questioning comes after the judge in the case, U.S. District Judge T.S. Ellis III, recently said that civilians are just as liable as government employees under laws governing the dissemination of classified information.

The trial of Steve Rosen and Keith Weissman, two former employees at AIPAC, the pro-Israel lobby, is expected to begin later this year.

Federation leaders heading to Ethiopia

A delegation is heading to Ethiopia to assess the situation of the Falash Mura.

The mission, sponsored by the United Jewish Communities, leaves Monday and is being billed as a fact-finding mission.

It comes as the North American federation system is trying to raise \$100 million for the estimated 20,000 Ethiopians still waiting to immigrate and for the absorption of the Ethiopians Jews in Israel. The North American Jewish community has already pledged \$45 million in this campaign, say UJC officials.

■ **MORE NEWS, Pg. 8**

WORLD REPORT

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Mark Garten/U.N.

U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice speaks during a Mideast peace 'Quartet' news conference in September 2005.

Global repugnance of Hamas breaks down on details of aid

By RON KAMPEAS

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The emerging consensus in Washington, Jerusalem and European capitals is to starve any Palestinian Authority run by Hamas. The emerging dispute is over what "starve" means.

"The Hamas party has made it clear that they do not support the right of Israel to exist, and I have made it clear so long as that's their policy, that we will not support a Palestinian government made up of Hamas," President Bush said before a Cabinet meeting Monday.

Earlier, in an interview on CBS's "Face

the Nation," he was explicit: "Aid packages won't go forward."

It sounds unequivocal, but a number of arguments have already erupted over how hard to squeeze the Palestinians for electing a terrorist group to a landslide victory.

One is whether to utterly cut off the Palestinians, or to maintain life support through emergency humanitarian assistance. Another is how soon to end assistance. And finally, there's the question of whether moneys that Israel owes the Palestinians have the same status as assistance.

In London, Condoleezza Rice, the U.S. sec-

Continued on page 2

NEWS
ANALYSIS

■ Various proposals ban direct funding of Hamas, but leave indirect funding open

Continued from page 1

retary of state, extracted a pledge Monday from the other members of the "Quartet" guiding the Middle East peace process — the United States, the European Union, the United Nations and Russia — to link assistance to a set of conditions.

"The Quartet concluded that it was inevitable that future assistance to any new government would be reviewed by donors against that government's commitment to the principles of nonviolence, recognition of Israel, and acceptance of previous agreements and obligations," the statement said.

That matched the conditions for Israeli cooperation with a Hamas-run Palestinian Authority outlined over the weekend by Ehud Olmert, the acting Israeli prime minister, in a conversation with Kofi Annan, the U.N. secretary-general.

The United States has its work cut out for it trying to keep the international community in line, said Dennis Ross, the top Middle East envoy in the Clinton administration.

"The international community cannot relax its basic posture," Ross said Monday at a forum of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, a think tank. "The administration will have to conduct an ongoing diplomacy that is intensive."

Russian President Vladimir Putin has already said aid should be unaffected by the election of Hamas.

Rice said humanitarian assistance would continue.

"The Quartet here today has been quite

clear that we have deep concern for the Palestinian people and for their well-being; that we're mindful of their needs," she said. "We have noted we're particularly mindful also of their humanitarian needs and everyone wants to see those needs met."

But that view could meet resistance on Capitol Hill.

A bill slated to be introduced this week by U.S. Rep. Anthony Weiner (D-N.Y.) would "prohibit United States assistance for the Palestinian Authority and for programs, projects, and activities in the West Bank and Gaza."

Cutting off "programs, projects, and activities in the West Bank and Gaza" effectively bans the emergency humanitarian assistance that Rice wants to continue, congressional officials say.

Of \$1.5 billion in direct U.S. assistance received by the Palestinians since 1993, \$371 million has been in humanitarian aid and emergency response. The rest has gone to reconstruction projects, health and social services and promoting democracy. All of it, however, because of congressional restrictions, bypasses the Palestinian Authority and goes to direct-assistance programs.

Weiner's bill also could stop Bush from using a national security waiver for humanitarian aid by making illegal any assistance to the Palestinian areas. Bush has used the waiver three times in recent years to get a total of \$90 million to the Palestinians without undergoing stringent congressional oversight procedures.

Weiner, who is close to the Zionist Organization of America, is often a lonely voice for the most severe measures in dealing with the Palestinians. But given the climate since the Hamas landslide, congressional staffers say, his bill stands a chance of passing.

"He didn't have the backing before the election, but who knows how many people would view this as a viable alternative now," said one staffer, who spoke anonymously because the bill has yet been formally introduced.

The American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the pro-Israel powerhouse, had yet to weigh in on whether it would support Weiner's bill. Americans for Peace

Now has already said that its own call to cut off Hamas does not extend to humanitarian assistance to the Palestinians.

Weiner's bill is competing with two other legislative measures promoted separately by Reps. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.) and Vito Fossella (R-N.Y.) and a non-binding resolution in the Senate introduced last week by Sen. John Thune (R-S.D.).

All of those initiatives leave open the possibility of continued humanitarian assistance, but shut down all other forms of assistance unless Hamas recognizes Israel, swears off violence and disarms terrorists — the same conditions put forth by Olmert and the Quartet.

The administration has signaled that it wants to keep this fight out of Congress for now, but it faces a battle over timing: Whatever their differences, all of the congressional bill sponsors want to cut off Hamas now.

The Bush administration has, by contrast, joined other members of the Quartet in saying assistance will continue while the interim government is being led by Mahmoud Abbas, the P.A. president and a relative moderate favored by Israel and the United States, and does not include Hamas.

"We are mindful of the needs of the caretaker government and reviewing obligations toward that government," State Department spokesman Adam Ereli said. It could be weeks before the new government forms and aid formally ends. The White House said it was encouraged by Abbas' re-commitment to the peace process.

Olmert expressed understanding for that position, but also voiced concern that in a matter of weeks, terrorists would appropriate money now headed for the Palestinians.

"We are, of course, very sensitive to Abu Mazen's authority and position, but in the circumstances that have been created, we have to be very cautious," Olmert said Monday after meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Abu Mazen is the name by which Abbas is commonly known.

"I have no intention of allowing the transfer of funds that will be used for terrorism," he said.

'The international community cannot relax its basic posture.'

Dennis Ross

Mideast envoy, Clinton administration

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Non-Jewish victim cites anti-Semitic attacks

By PENNY SCHWARTZ

WILLIAMSTOWN, Mass. (JTA) — A picturesque New England college town is finding it isn't immune to racial intolerance and anti-Semitic slurs.

For the past month, local media reports have disclosed charges of bullying at Mt. Greylock Regional School District in western Massachusetts directed against Billy George, a 12-year-old boy who is a seventh-grader at the district's middle school.

His parents, Kathi and Fred George, say he has been the victim of 11 assaults since the beginning of the school year, some of which include racist and anti-Semitic slurs and threats.

Mt. Greylock, nestled into the snow-covered Berkshire mountains, serves students in grades seven through 12 from Williamstown, home to prestigious Williams College. There were 218 seventh- and eighth-graders last school year, according to the state's Department of Education, which also reports higher-than-average scores on statewide mandated tests.

The Georges' story raises vexing questions about what constitutes prejudice, anti-Semitism and hate crimes — and how to overcome the stigma of confronting these issues in a small community.

Among the disturbing and ironic twists to the Georges' story is the fact that the George family, longtime residents of Williamstown, is not Jewish.

But Fred George, Billy's father, is a third-generation Lebanese American whose family has lived in Williamstown for 53 years.

Fred and Kathi George, who is white, now believe Billy was "picked on" because of Billy's dark skin color. The Georges have three daughters; the two oldest are adopted, a fact they note because they are white-skinned and never experienced any discrimination in the schools. Their biological daughter, a senior at Mt. Greylock High School, is also darker-skinned.

"At first, I didn't even think of the racial comments," Kathi George recalls during a recent conversation at the family's kitchen table which, since Nov. 14, is also serving as Billy's classroom, as he is now being home-schooled by his parents and a private tutor.

"Then when we started looking to these

instances, and there were more and more of them, it always seemed there was a nasty name that went along with the attack. It was like somebody slapped me in the face," George says. "This is not because they think he's small, it's because they think he's different. That was the most unbelievable realization for me."

"People expect that these kinds of incidents won't happen in schools and universities," explains Mark Potok, director of the intelligence project at the Southern Poverty Law Center, publishers of Teaching Tolerance, a widely used magazine for educators which addresses intolerance and bigotry.

But middle and high schools, as well as colleges reflect society as a whole. There are about 1 million "bias" incidents on these American campuses each year, Potok says.

"There's no question that it's best to bring it out in the open," Potok comments, though it's easy to understand why schools are averse to drawing attention to themselves in these circumstances, he adds. "But the reality is that it's invariably better to confront or be proactive."

Several people interviewed for this story, including Rabbi Howard Cohen, whose Congregation Beth El in nearby Bennington, Vt., includes families whose kids attend the Mt. Greylock school, cite the sharp educational and economic stratification in the area as one explanation for persistent incidents of racial and religious intolerance.

In recent weeks, the school department is responding to the Georges' allegations in a variety of ways, according to William Travis, Mt. Greylock's school superintendent, including expanding anti-bullying and tolerance-related programs into the elementary schools, a key to establishing a common framework for students as they enter middle school.

Peer mediators at the high school are involved in the World of Difference program developed by the New England

office of the Anti-Defamation League, and ADL is working with the school's adviser to establish a bond between the high school and middle school students, according to Sue Lonergan of the New England ADL regional office.

In a statement to the police on Nov. 15, Billy wrote that among other incidents, two boys began kicking him repeatedly a day before while he was sitting down in a school corridor, tying his shoes.

Earlier in the day, Billy alleges that one of those boys came up behind him and asked if he was an "[expletive] Jew."

Travis asserts he has seen no anti-Semitism or racist patterns of behavior at the school, but acknowledges that comments such as those alleged by Billy are unacceptable.

In a conversation at the Jewish Federation of Berkshire County, director Arlene Schiff says she wrote to the chairman of the school committee at Mt. Greylock, offering to help establish a program to combat prejudice, similar to one she and Travis created in Pittsfield, when Travis was superintendent in that city. The chairman thanked her in a phone call, but declined her offer, Schiff says.

The committee chairman could not be reached for comment on the incident.

This case, which has resulted in criminal charges being brought against three juveniles, has also attracted the attention of the state's office of the attorney general, which contacted the Georges directly, and the district attorney of Berkshire County, David Capeless, who met with the school's staff on Jan. 26 to help set up policies to combat bullying.

Billy says it was hard to work up the courage to tell his parents about the incidents, which he doesn't want to talk about any more. He enjoys math and seeing his friends, he says, who continue to come by his house to hang out. He also says he just wants it to be safe for him to go back to school.

Kathi George agrees. "Our hope is that Billy can go back to school and be comfortable there."

Billy said a fellow student asked if he was an '[expletive] Jew.' Later that day, the boy, along with another student, attacked Billy.

FOCUS
ON
ISSUES

Israeli team hopes to skate into history

By PETER EPHROSS

NEW YORK (JTA) — Galit Chait left Israel with her family as an infant and grew up in the United States. Sergei Sakhnovski grew up in Russia and immigrated to the Jewish state at the age of 19.

In a few weeks, the ice-dancing duo, both Israeli citizens, will be the best hope for Israel's first-ever medal in the Winter Olympic Games, which will take place in Turin, Italy, from Feb. 10-Feb. 26.

It's a responsibility they're reminded of whenever they're in Israel, where they've put ice skating on the map.

"We're not only skating for ourselves," Chait said last week during an interview at their home rink in northern New Jersey. "We're skating for a country — and a country that expects a lot."

According to most observers, Israelis are right to expect a lot from the pair. They won a bronze medal at the 2002 World Championships and are considered serious contenders in Turin.

"They need to skate well," said one of

their coaches, two-time Russian Olympic gold medalist Evgeny Platov. "And have some luck."

If Chait and Sakhnovski do, they would make history for Israel. Israel has won medals in Summer Olympics; most recently, Gal Fridman won a gold in windsurfing at the Athens Games in 2004.

During the interview at the snack-bar area at the Floyd Hall Arena in Little Falls, N.J., Chait and Sakhnovski, both 30, couldn't seem more different.

Pretty and petite, her hair dyed a reddish orange, Chait describes herself as full of energy, "like the Energizer bunny." She admitted to being anxious, while he's the calmer of the two.

Sakhnovski — with longish dark hair, brooding eyes and small glasses — looks like a graduate student in philosophy.

On the ice, their personalities mesh well. They're known for their intense, expressive skating style that has made them favorites with the fans. During the Olympics, their free dance will feature Ravel's Bolero, while during their original dance they will skate to cha-cha, rumba and samba music.

But they took very different paths as young skaters.

Chait was born in the Israeli city of Kfar Saba to parents who had immigrated to the Jewish state from the then-Soviet republic of Moldova. Her family moved to the United States before she turned 1. At the age of 8, she began her skating career with a trip to Rockefeller Center in New York City.

She competed for a while in individual events before switching to ice dancing.

Sakhnovski, whose father is Jewish but whose mother is not, began skating in Russia at age 4 — "when my mother pushed me into it," he said.

By the age of 8, he was already into ice dancing, which is similar to pairs figure skating, but does not allow lifts or other strength moves.

"It's a stage — you need the play there like an actor," said Sakhnovski, who im-

migrated to Israel on his own as a young adult.

His family still lives in Moscow, while he lives in Freehold, N.J., as does Chait.

After skating with other partners, the two came together in the mid-1990s, at the suggestion of another coach. They finished 14th at the 1998 Olympics in Nagano, Japan, and sixth at the 2002 Olympics in Salt Lake City.

The climb hasn't been easy. Except for a month off in June, the two train at least six to eight hours a day. Training includes running, weightlifting and ballet, as well as ice time. They reduce the workload only during the winter, when there are skating competitions.

"For eight and a half months, we work every single day," Chait said.

Their work has paid off, not only for themselves but for Israel's image in the world.

Boris Chait, Galit's father, who also serves as chairman of the Israeli Ice Skating Federation, said that recently, a Chinese woman approached him after a competition and said, "Kol hakavod," which translates loosely from the Hebrew as "more power to you."

The two are "some of the best ambassadors of the country in the world," Boris Chait said.

They're ambassadors within Israel as well.

"When we started skating, people weren't aware there was an ice-dancing team from Israel. People laughed at us," Galit Chait said. "Now everyone knows."

After the Turin Olympics are over, they said, they plan to stop skating as amateurs and want to train and coach, promoting the sport further in Israel. There the national rink is part of the Canada Centre, located in the city of Metulla in northern Israel.

While they might promote the sport together in Israel in the future, theirs is only a business relationship. They are each dating others — Chait's boyfriend is Jewish, while Sakhnovski's girlfriend is not.

On a late January day, they skate in the New Jersey rink, which features a Pepsi scoreboard with a sign that says, "Home of the Montclair Hockey Club."

She's wearing a light blue fleece and white sweats, he's wearing a medium blue sweatsuit with the letters "ISR" for Israel

Continued on page 5

THE 2006 OLYMPICS



Credit: Mike Braca

Israeli ice dancers Galit Chait and Sergei Sakhnovski.

'Wandering' Jewish hockey star heads to Turin

By CHANAN TIGAY

NEW YORK (JTA) — Mathieu Schneider's father calls him "the Wandering Jew."

And while, historically speaking, most Jews haven't done their wandering on ice skates, it's not difficult to see how the term applies to Schneider: Over the course of his 17-year National Hockey League career, he's played in six different cities.

Currently a star defenseman for the Detroit Red Wings, he's bounced from Montreal to Long Island to Toronto to Manhattan to Los Angeles and, most recently, on to Detroit.

"I've been fortunate throughout my career to play in cities with tremendous

Jewish communities," Schneider, 36, told JTA. "I feel as though I've been a role model in each city that I've played in. There are very few Jewish hockey players, and it's been a nice role for me and I've really enjoyed it."

In February, Schneider will be suiting up for another trip: this one to Turin, Italy, where the "Wandering Jew" will strap on his skates as a member of the U.S. Olympic Hockey Team.

It's the second time Schneider will be representing the United States on Olympic ice — and this time, Schneider says, he's hoping to just enjoy the experience. "The first time around there were so many uncertainties," Schneider, a native of New York, says of the 1998 Games. "It was the first time the NHL went to the Olympics. The travel was really tough."

Schneider has played in more than 1,000 NHL games since 1987. Along with Washington's Jeff Halpern and Los Angeles' Michael Cammalleri, Schneider is thought to be one of just three Jews in the NHL.

He says his religion hasn't been a problem for him on the ice.

Early on in his career, he recalled, there was an incident in which an opposing player unleashed an ethnic slur.

"That was the first time I heard any of that stuff. I made a mental note that the next time I had a chance, I would run the guy into the sideboards. And I did," he was quoted as saying on the Jewishvirtuallibrary.org Web site.

But outside of that — and one other similar experience at the start of his career — "there's never been any kind of taunting on the ice since."

In the intervening years, he said, the NHL has instituted sensitivity training for its players, and Schneider thinks it's working.

"I think society in

general has become a lot more aware of it, and the sports world just kind of caught up," he said.

Schneider, who maintains a home in California and is a member of the Jewish Community Center in Redondo Beach, Calif., said that over the years he has made an effort to sit out on Yom Kippur and fast. It's generally not too hard, he said, because the High

Holidays tend to fall during training camp and not during regular season play.

Schneider's mother converted to Judaism to marry his father. Today, he said, "she's probably the most knowledgeable of the whole family" about Judaism.

Schneider and his wife, who has been in the process of converting for the last couple of years, have three children — and one more on the way. They are, he said, being raised as Jews.

"As you get older, and especially when you have a family, religion becomes more important," he said. "I was raised as a proud Jew and I believe a lot of the lessons Judaism teaches relate really well to family."

"In the times we live in, I think it's very important to give children that sense of guidance," he added. "Jews have always stuck together."

Schneider is thought to be one of three Jewish players in the National Hockey League.

Continued from page 4

on the back that he takes off as the practice gets going.

For the next hour and a half, they glide, bend and dance together on the ice, occasionally stopping to receive instruction from their Russian coaches.

It's a relaxed practice, since they just finished the European Championships in Lyon, France, where they finished fifth. They'll gradually increase their skating time, and spend the immediate pre-Olympics period in Russia to acclimate to European time.

But whether or not they reach the podium depends on the judges in the notoriously political world of skating. They believe they should have finished higher at the competition in France.

Boris Chait doesn't mince his words on the subject.

"If they had been skating for the United States, if they had been skating for Canada, if they had been skating for Russia, they would have had a much easier time," he said, adding, "Israel has to say thank you for being accepted into the boys club."

Galit Chait is more diplomatic. "After this, I understood that you can't fight with it," she said of the judges' decision.

It wasn't the first time controversy has surrounded the pair. At the 2002 World Championships, after Chait and Sakhnovski edged out a Lithuanian duo for a bronze medal, a petition protesting the decision circulated among competitors and judges. But the ruling stood.

Gailt Chait said she has learned a lesson: "Don't skate for the judges; skate for the people."



Detroit Red Wings

Mathieu Schneider of the Detroit Red Wings and the U.S. Olympic Hockey Team.

In Minsk, women's group writes mezuzahs

By YULIANNNA VILKOS

MINSK, Belarus (JTA) — Minsk native Rita Ginsburg says she knew about mezuzahs long before she visited Israel three years ago. But it was only after her trip that she decided to put one up at her apartment.

"In Israel, there are mezuzahs everywhere, even on the shops' doorways, symbolizing God's presence in a place," she says.

In Belarus, however, where Judaism wasn't legal under Soviet rule, few households even today have mezuzahs.

When Ginsburg asked Rabbi Grisha Abramovich, the leader of Minsk's Reform community, where she could get one, he told her she wouldn't be able to in Belarus.

"Well, why don't you show me one, maybe I could write it myself?" Ginsburg recalls suggesting to him.

Today, Ginsburg is part of a group of five local women who write the Torah portion on the tiny parchment housed inside the mezuzah case. This group is, Abramovich believes, the only all-female mezuzah-writing group in Eastern Europe.

"In this country, there is not a single Jewish shop where you could buy a mezuzah. You can find such shops in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kiev, but not in Minsk," he says.

Mezuzahs may not be sold in stores, but they are available through Chabad in Belarus, says Rabbi Avraham Berkowitz, executive director of the Chabad-sponsored Federation of Jewish Communities. "If someone calls our office in any city where we have a rabbi, they will get a mezuzah," he says.

The Reform project started with a book on soferim, or Torah scribes, that Abramovich and his wife, Ira, brought back from Israel a couple of years ago.

"At first, we just joked that we would start writing mezuzahs, but then one day we got kosher feathers, ink, and parchment, and I sat down to write," Ira Abramovich says.

It took her more than six hours to write her first ones.

After she had practiced for several months, the couple held a mezuzah-writing seminar and invited a professional sofer from Israel to teach the skill to a wider group of people. Both men and women were invited to the seminar, but only five women committed to the project.

Although traditionally women do not write mezuzahs, Abramovich says the project reflects the Reform movement's idea of gender equality.

"To be honest, I am a little concerned that Orthodox Jews won't buy our mezuzahs," he says.

Currently the group produces about 25 mezuzahs a month, most of which are acquired by the Jerusalem-based World Union of Reform Judaism. The women receive an honorarium for their work, and the mezuzahs are sold to raise money for Reform activities in the former Soviet Union. Abramovich says it will take some time before the women get up to speed and are able to produce the items more quickly, and before a distribution process for Belarus is established.

"We would have to consider both Jewish and Belarusian laws in order to start making our mezuzahs available to a wider public," he explains.

And even though there is no huge demand for mezuzahs from local Jews yet, Abramovich hopes that as more people learn about the project, they will want mezuzahs for their own homes. A logical clientele would be the 3,000 members of Minsk's Reform community, as well as the 7,000 others who attend the group's activities.

Ginsburg says the technical aspect of writing mezuzahs is not easy. "Once you write on parchment, you can't make a mistake, and the rules on how to write are very strict," she says.

For instance, the same letters should look identical wherever they appear, and the distance between the letters and the lines are strictly determined.

Still, she says the learning process went surprisingly smoothly, and after several months of practicing on regular paper, she was ready to switch to parch-

ment. A retired economist who had never written in Hebrew before, Ginsburg says writing mezuzahs has become the only thing she does for herself amid her daily routine of taking care of the house and children.

"I get so excited when I sit down to write that I can't get up from the table before I finish," she says. "I feel like God is hovering above me all the time."

Poll: Russians don't dislike Jews

By LEV KRICHEVSKY

MOSCOW (JTA) — The majority of Russians do not harbor negative feelings toward Jews and the percentage of Russians who disapprove of anti-Semitism has increased since last year, according to a new nationwide poll.

A year ago, a poll conducted by the same firm, the Public Opinion Foundation, found that 47 percent of Russians said they were neutral toward those who dislike Jews, compared to 38 percent this year. Last year, 34 percent said they had negative feelings about those who do not like Jews, compared to 42 percent this year.

Among other findings of the poll conducted by the foundation, a leading Moscow-based polling firm:

- Seven percent of the respondents distrust or dislike Jews, 84 percent do not have these feelings and 9 percent found it difficult to answer this question;

- Five percent said they approve of the people who do not like Jews, 38 percent indicated they were neutral toward such people, 42 percent were negative about the people who don't like Jews and 16 percent found it difficult to answer;

- Eight percent believe that in the area where they live there are many people who harbor negative feelings toward Jews, 31 percent said that there are few such people, 19 percent said that there are no such people at all, and 43 percent could not answer definitely.

The poll of 2,100 in 44 Russian regions was taken on Jan. 21-22. The margin of error for the sampling is plus or minus 3.6 percentage points, the pollster reported.

The group is believed to be the only all-female mezuzah writing group in Eastern Europe.

Wasserstein chronicled women's plight

By ABIGAIL SCHWARTZ

NEW YORK (JTA) — Playwright Wendy Wasserstein was known for her wry portrayal of strong, conflicted women.

While not always overtly Jewish, her characters still bore the mark of the playwright's traditional Jewish upbringing in New York.

Later in her life, the feminist writer became a Jewish mother, though perhaps not in the way her own Jewish mother pictured.

Wasserstein died of lymphoma Monday in New York at the age of 55.

Wasserstein wrote "in ways that are profoundly Jewish," said Joyce Antler, professor of American Jewish history and women's studies at Brandeis University.

Her "ideas of show business came from the synagogue — for her that sense

of theater as a space for expressing these views was influenced by her Jewishness," Antler said.

And though her focus was on the American woman, not just the Jewish American woman, she expressed "the modern dilemma of American women with a Jewish accent, a Jewish sensibility," Antler said.

Said the editor in chief of *Lilith Magazine*, Susan Weidman

Schneider:

"She may be the only playwright of national stature to capture, moment by moment, the changing lives of women in the last part of the 20th century."

Wasserstein's works include "The Heidi Chronicles," for which she won a Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award in 1989, and "The Sisters Rosensweig," which featured three middle-aged Jewish siblings who come together in London for a birthday party.

In that play, "she was able to have anger at aspects of Jewish family life and yet be appreciative," said Schneider, of both "the discomfort and warm pleasures of family life."

"Sisters" deals with "developing new identities out of Jewish expectations," Antler said.

One sister, who is secular, comes home, discusses with her siblings what it means to be Jewish and discovers her Jewish identity.

Even in plays with less overtly Jewish themes, Wasserstein's work reflects the perspective of "a woman who bears demographic accents of a Jewish woman," Antler added.

The lead protagonist in her first play, "Uncommon Women and Others" in 1977, is Holly, a Jewish woman in the last year of an elite women's college similar to Mount Holyoke, Wasserstein's alma mater.

The play continues six years later when Holly and her friends reunite over lunch to compare life paths. Each one is simultaneously successful and lacking in her life — the professionals are still seeking fulfilling relationships, one is happily married and pregnant but unemployed

and unsure of whether she should have pursued a career.

The member of the group that has both a fulfilling marriage and career is unable to make it, having moved to Iraq — the implication being that in order to achieve both these things, she had to make an extreme sacrifice.

Wasserstein's characters mostly aged with her, and continued in this vein: Strong, interesting and passionate, if conflicted, and generally "uncommon."

The playwright, who attended a yeshiva in Brooklyn as a child, "was extraordinary in her ability to be deeply honest in a kind of sidelong and ironic way in writing about her experience as a Jewish woman," Schneider said.

Her 'ideas of show business came from the synagogue.'

Joyce Antler

Professor of American Jewish history and women's studies, Brandeis University

Wasserstein, who once said that her traditional parents allowed her to study at Yale's School of Drama in the hope that she'd find a doctor or lawyer to marry, celebrated "educated women dealing with professional ambition and societal expectations in terms of marriage and/or procreation," Schneider said.

Wasserstein's best-known work, "The Heidi Chronicles," covers the life of Heidi, a feminist art historian, over the span of a few decades, from a dance school in 1965 to her decision to adopt a child and become a single mother in 1989 — a mirror to Wasserstein's own decision to have a baby by herself in 1999.

In addition to about a dozen plays, Wasserstein's oeuvre included two collections of essays, "Bachelor Girls" and "Shiksa Goddess: or, How I Spent My Forties," the non-fiction work "Sloth," a parody of a self-help book; and a forthcoming novel.

Her plays might have been loosely autobiographical, but her essays were frank discussions of events in her life, such as her decision to have a child on her own.

"She followed a path from career woman to being a Jewish mother," Antler said. And though she didn't follow the traditional route, "she is the voice of her generation as a proud Jewish mother."

COMMUNITY

TRANSITIONS

■ The Institute on Religion and Public Policy in Washington appointed Shai Franklin to its executive leadership cabinet. Franklin is executive director of the World Jewish Congress' American section.

■ Meretz USA elected a new president and vice president. Lilly Rivlin was elected president; she will take the place of Harold Shapiro, who served 15 years in the post. Other election results include Lawrence Lerner, chair; and Shlomo Adam Roth, Alex Sharone and Mairav Zonszein, vice presidents.

HONORS

■ The British government honored two supporters of ORT, Clive Marks and David Cesarani. Marks was awarded the Order of the British Empire for his interfaith work with Jews and Christians. Cesarani, a research professor in history at Royal Holloway, University of London, was awarded the Order of the British Empire for services to Holocaust education. Cesarani is providing academic supervision on a project researching ORT's activities in the displaced persons camps of postwar Europe.

■ Women's eNews honored Gail Twersky Reimer, founding director of Jewish Women's Archive; Ellen Malcolm, founder of grassroots political network Emily's List; Emmy Award-winning documentary filmmaker Sheila Nevins; Anita DeFrantz, former Olympic medalist and president of the Amateur Athletic Association; and union activist Anna Burger.

NEWS IN BRIEF

NORTH AMERICA

Interfaith prayer at breakfast

A National Prayer Breakfast in Washington concluded with an interfaith prayer for peace in the Middle East.

On Thursday in Washington, U.S. Sen. Norm Coleman (R-Minn.) joined his co-host, Sen. Mark Prior (D-Ark.), and King Abdullah of Jordan in offering the prayer for peace as well as for recovery from Hurricane Katrina along the U.S. Gulf Coast, and relief and aid for Africa.

Coleman is believed to be the first Jew to host the prayer breakfast, an annual tradition that brings together politicians from both parties since 1963. Sen. Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.) offered a prayer for national leaders.

Jewish groups join Katrina aid

Jewish organizations helped bankroll aid to credit unions in New Orleans.

A large part of the \$280,000 delivered Jan. 27 to the credit unions was collected by the Jewish Funds for Justice, in partnership with UJA-Federation of New York, the National Credit Union Foundation and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

The donation makes it possible for more high-risk applicants to obtain loans for home repair at lower interest rates.

Jewish Funds for Justice has raised more than \$700,000 for credit unions and community development, financial institutions and grant-making in areas hit by Katrina.

WORLD

WZO election deadlines approach

Close to 50,000 people have voted so far in the World Zionist Organization elections.

With the registration deadline approaching on Feb. 15, the number represents a little more than half of those who voted in the last elections in 2002. Another 25,000-30,000 people are expected to vote before the Feb. 28 voting deadline.

Voters cast ballots (www.congressofthejewishpeople.com) for representatives to the WZO's 35th Congress of the Jewish People, which will be held in Israel in June. Organizers are intensifying advertising to attract more voters, including a push on the Internet.

"We would have liked to have seen higher registration," said Karen Rubinstein, executive director of the American Zionist Movement, which runs the U.S. elections.

Jewish leaders to visit Azerbaijan

A group of Jewish leaders will visit Azerbaijan later this month.

The delegation, under the auspices of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, will meet in Baku with President Ilham Aliyev and other top officials during the Feb. 9-13 trip.

Azerbaijan is a nation of "significant strategic, political and economic importance as a major oil exporter, neighbor of Iran, and for its role in confronting extremist Islamic movements," said Harold Tanner, chairman of the Presidents Conference.

The delegation also plans to discuss utilizing Azerbaijan's positive relations with Israel as a model for other Muslim countries around the world, said Malcolm Hoenlein, the group's executive vice chairman.

The visit is being planned in coordination with NCSJ Advocates on Behalf of Jews in Russia, Ukraine, the Baltic States and Eurasia, and the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress.

From Baku, the American leaders will fly to Jerusalem.

Report: Anti-Semitic incidents down in Britain

Anti-Semitic incidents decreased by 14 percent in Britain in 2005, according to a new report. The main area of improvement was in the number of threats since 2004, according to the report, released by the Community Security Trust, a Jewish group.

Among violent assaults, there were 82 reported incidents in 2005, down one from the historically high number in 2004.

Alleged synagogue attacker fit for trial

Medical experts in Russia concluded that a man who attacked worshippers in a Moscow synagogue is fit to stand trial.

The decision contradicts earlier claims by his family that Alexander Koptsev was mentally ill. On Jan. 11, Koptsev went on a knife-wielding rampage in the Bolshaya Bronnaya Street Synagogue in Moscow, injuring eight people.

The ruling cleared the way for official charges to be pressed against Koptsev, who could receive life in prison if found guilty on one of the two counts.

Russian students get Jewish history textbook

A new Jewish history textbook for Russian students was published in Moscow. The Russian-language 700-page "History of Russian Jews" was published by Lechaim, a Moscow-based Chabad publishing house.

The textbook is targeted toward higher educational establishments and will have an initial print run of 1,000.

The project's collaborators highlighted the ability of such texts to combat anti-Semitic myths and expressed hopes that the textbook material will be incorporated by the Russian Federation's Ministry of Education, the AEN news agency reported.

ORT school expands

A Jewish school in Argentina run by ORT is expanding to meet student demand.

In recent years, up to 300 students have been rejected from the ORT school in Buenos Aires because of a lack of space.

The school has two high school buildings with 4,100 students and a junior college with 2,000 students.

Some \$2.5 million will go into the expansion project.

MIDDLE EAST

World Bank: P.A. finances 'unsustainable'

The Palestinian Authority's fiscal situation is "unsustainable," a World Bank report said.

The main reason is "unconstrained government consumption," particularly its huge salaries.

The Palestinian Authority is the main employer of Palestinians and sustains much of the economy through its salaries.

The overall economy is performing 30 percent below its pre-intifada capacity, the World Bank said, which is primarily a result of "restrictions on the movement of people and goods."

Israel maintains a number of security strictures on the Palestinians to stem terrorist attacks.

Planting trees for ex-Gazans

The Jewish National Fund is planting 500 trees at the temporary Israeli home of evacuees from the Gaza Strip.

The planting at Nitzan, in southern Israel, will take place during the week of Tu B'Shevat, which begins this year on the evening of Feb. 12.

The planting at Nitzan will highlight the traditional planting of trees across Israel during the week of Tu B'Shevat.