

IN THE NEWS

Israel rebuffs U.N. on Lebanon

Israel rebuffed a United Nations request to lift its sea and air blockade on Lebanon. U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan, fresh from a visit to Beirut, made the request to Ehud Olmert in their meeting in Jerusalem on Wednesday.

The Israeli prime minister said the blockade, which was imposed shortly after Hezbollah killed eight Israeli soldiers and abducted two on July 12, would remain in place until a U.N. cease-fire resolution is put into action.

Lebanese leader cool on peace deal

Lebanon's prime minister said his country would not sign an independent peace deal with Israel.

"Let it be clear, we are not seeking any agreement until there is just and comprehensive peace based on the Arab initiative," Fouad Siniora said Wednesday. "Lebanon is the last Arab country that could sign a peace accord with Israel."

Wartime victims may sue France

Families of hundreds of World War II-era victims are demanding \$162 million from the French government and national railroad. Hundreds of letters from victims around the world were sent out demanding reparations for wartime suffering.

The letters cover Jews, members of the French Resistance and gays, among others, who were interned in camps in France and then deported in railroad cars.

The letters come after a French court earlier this year ordered the state and the railroad to pay reparations to a family in a deportation case. A lawyer in the current case said the letters could be followed by lawsuits if the government and railroad refuse the request.

WORLD REPORT

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

Shoah rescuers have moral honor, but in Poland they lack basic needs

By DINAH A. SPRITZER

WARSZAWA (JTA) — Marysia Ambrozy has participated in a lot of events honoring those who helped Jews during the Holocaust, but a recent ceremony in Wroclaw, Poland, made her cry for all the wrong reasons.

In May, two elderly sisters were recognized by Yad Vashem for helping their impoverished parents feed, house and hide nine Jews during the Holocaust.

At the awards ceremony, Ambrozy, a cultural assistant at the Israeli Embassy in Warsaw, overheard a newspaper interview with the sisters, who were in their early teens at the time of their parents' act of valor.

"They said that they don't need a medal and they don't care about it," she said, adding that the sisters said that "what they need is money. The journalist was asking them, 'Don't you think that you did a great thing?' And they answered — 'Our stupid mother was helping and never got anything for this.'"

The sisters' bitterness is perhaps a rare phenomenon, she noted, but it illustrates some of the problems Righteous Gentiles, as they're called, and their heirs have in Poland and elsewhere in Eastern Europe. They tend to be from poorer areas, since it was easier to hide Jews in rural villages during the war than in cities.

Ambrozy explained that after World War II ended, the sisters' mother was physically attacked by neighbors for helping Jews.

The sisters' father died of cancer after the family was too poor to pay for his medical treatment.

The sisters sought financial aid for their family from Jewish organizations, but were unsuccessful, according to Ambrozy, who added that they were now desperate for money to pay for their own medicine.

"Ninety percent of the righteous being awarded today in Poland have no money for basic medications or even for a ticket to come to their own ceremonies," she lamented.

Ceremonies for the righteous are held almost every month in Poland because aging survivors sometimes wait until late in life to let their families and Yad Vashem know about their protectors and their wartime suffering.

Ambrozy's boss, cultural attache Ya'akov Finkelstein, points to what he says is an equally disturbing stumbling block for the Righteous Gentiles.

"I get letters each month from people who tell us they don't want the ceremony where they live, they don't want people to know about the award, which really shocked me when I came here," Finkelstein said.

Some medal recipients worry their fellow villagers will be jealous, Finkelstein said.

"They're concerned that their neighbors think they're getting money from the Jews," he explained.

"Others were worried that they might be robbed if the media put the word out that they got some kind of award, and then there are some who say their neighbors will condemn them for being supported by Jews.

It seems the further east in the country
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■ Nearly 6,000 Poles have been recognized as Righteous Gentiles

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you go, the more common that attitude is," Finkelstein estimated.

Saving Jews from the gas chambers in Poland was a remarkable feat of bravery in the country that had the largest number of Jews perish.

The Nazi punishment for Poles who helped Jews was death, often the death of one's entire family. Some who merely gave food to Jews were murdered on the spot, while others were tortured before being killed and many were sent to concentration camps.

Yet more people in Poland helped Jews than in any other nation, according to Yad Vashem, which has recognized nearly 6,000 Righteous Among the Nations in Poland.

There is a very active association of those who saved Jews that touts its members' achievements with pride, but whether their deeds are admired or even appreciated by most Poles remains unclear.

"It's ridiculous that there were Poles who were not afraid of the Nazis, but are afraid of their neighbors," Finkelstein said.

An extensive report last spring in Poland's leading daily, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, chronicled the fear some recipients of the Yad Vashem medal feel.

Estee Ya'ari, spokeswoman for Yad Vashem, said via e-mail that most people who receive the recognition are proud, but added, "we have heard of a few cases in Poland where righteous prefer that

their names not be made public, and this is indeed an unfortunate comment on the environment in which they live. As for other countries, we are not familiar with similar cases."

To strengthen the official endorsement of Righteous Gentiles' position in Polish life, more Polish politicians, including the current national president and the heads of both houses of Parliament, have been turning up at the Israeli Embassy's award ceremonies.

The righteous also are frequently referred to in politicians' speeches as one of the country's deepest sources of pride. In Lodz, a city recently known for its numerous initiatives memorializing Jews, a park dedicated to the righteous has been opened.

In Krakow, one of the country's first exhibitions devoted to the righteous opened earlier this year at the Galicia Jewish Museum.

However, the righteous face the same financial difficulties as all other aging people in Eastern Europe. Their tiny pensions — most live on \$150 to \$300 a month — have not kept pace with inflation and many struggle to survive.

Poland, for instance, has some of the highest prices for medicine per income in the European Union; in Ukraine, gas and electricity prices have been particularly difficult for the elderly to bear.

Yad Vashem's medal award is meant as a symbolic endorsement of moral courage, since a financial award might

suggest that one should help others for personal economic gain, those familiar with the recognition program explain.

Cash-strapped local governments say they would love to provide greater sustenance to the righteous, but insist they already face many other social problems that affect all of their elderly.

The Jewish Foundation for the Righteous, founded in 1986, is the only organization that provides financial support to those who have received the Yad Vashem recognition.

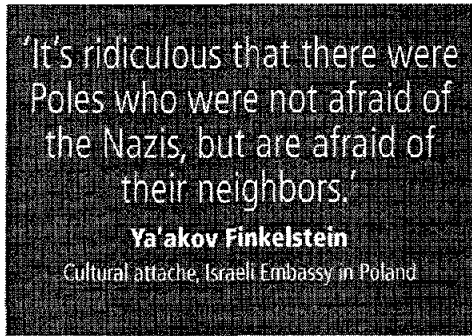
The foundation is funded by the New York-based Claims Conference, and has a budget of \$1.4 million. It provides stipends to 1,450 men and women in 28 countries, including about 700 in Poland.

The monthly support in Poland was raised from \$75 to \$100 in May — and is paid out quarterly.

"It definitely helps me survive; it means I can get medicine" said Righteous Gentile Maria Florek, whose pension is \$200 a month.

Stanlee Joyce Stahl, the foundation's executive vice president, hinted that descendants of Holocaust survivors should be interested in the well-being of the descendants of the righteous.

"If the survivors went on and had children and grandchildren, the question is, where is the family?" she asked "Most people during the Holocaust were bystanders. There were a precious few rescuers. There is not enough the Jewish community could ever do for them." ■



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. 10001-5919. 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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Poland to take up compensation bill

PRAGUE (JTA) — A bill in Poland on compensation for property confiscated by the Nazis will be addressed by the country's Parliament next month.

The bill, which proposes a 15 percent rate of compensation for property based on current prices, is on the Parliament's agenda for Sept. 6-8.

The bill covers property stolen by the Nazis from Jewish owners, which was

later taken by the Communist state. If the bill passes, about 20 percent of the claims are expected to come from Jewish owners and their heirs.

Claimants would not be required to have Polish citizenship to apply for compensation.

Jewish groups have objected to the level of compensation offered in the bill. ■

Ukraine's 'Jewish city' has a Jewish mayor

By VLADIMIR MATVEYEV

ODESSA, Ukraine (JTA) — It's not surprising that Odessa, Ukraine, would have a Jewish mayor.

After all, the Black Sea port city — long considered Ukraine's "most Jewish" city — gave the world political and cultural Zionism, along with the stories of Sholom Aleichem and Isaac Babel.

But Odessa's mayor, Edward Gurvitz, doesn't wear his Jewish identity on his sleeve.

"To be a Jew is my nationality, not my profession," he told JTA, sounding like most Ukrainian citizens born and raised under communism. "I'm an ethnic Jew and an atheist."

Gurvitz, 58, was one of four Jews to win Ukrainian mayoral elections in March, despite what many describe as a steady increase in anti-Semitic incidents in the country.

Born in the Ukrainian town of Mogilyov-Podolskiy, Gurvitz insists that he always felt Jewish.

He remembers that his grandmother could speak and write both Yiddish and Hebrew, and his family celebrated Passover.

But that personal history, not atypical for Jews of his generation, was pretty much the extent of his Jewish knowledge.

Still, he prides himself on never hiding his Jewish background to help his career. "All my life I was a Jew, and had 'Jew' stamped in my passport," he said, referring to the notorious "fifth line" on Soviet passports that stated the bearer's ethnic identity.

After studying construction engineering in Leningrad, Gurvitz arrived in Odessa at age 29. He became one of the city's first private entrepreneurs in the late 1980s under former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of economic freedoms.

In 1990, he went into politics and was elected head of an Odessa district. In 1994, he won a seat in the Ukrainian Parliament and was also elected mayor of Odessa.

He was re-elected to both positions four years later, but due to what was widely reported as political pressure, his opponent in the mayoral election was declared the winner.

The same thing happened in 2002, and it took court intervention to overturn those results. Gurvitz won re-election in March, and will serve as mayor until 2011.

"If a Jew reaches that high, he must have much energy and talent," said Josef Zissels, leader of the Ukrainian Va'ad and a veteran leader of the Ukrainian Jewish community. "Gurvitz is a very businesslike person, and his Jewish character and Jewish mentality help him to succeed."

In addition to Gurvitz, Vladimir Saldo was re-elected as mayor of Kherson, and Mikhail Dobkin and Vladimir Groisman won in Kharkov and Vinnitsa, respectively, all three cities with active Jewish communities.

None of these men is particularly active in Jewish life, although local Jewish leaders insist they help support the communities in other ways.

Ilya Grobman, the chairman of the Jewish community of Vinnitsa, says Groisman gives money to a local Jewish TV show, helped to return a synagogue building to Jewish ownership and goes to synagogue "on some Jewish holidays."

In Kherson, Rabbi Josef Wolf insists that Saldo "actively supports the Jewish community at a high level," but declined to be more specific.

In Kharkov, Dobkin's involvement with the Jewish community appears negligible.

Just this August, he declined to weigh in when the Jewish community protested plans to build a residential development at a Holocaust memorial site.

Gurvitz, on the other hand, although never a member of any Jewish organization, has stepped forward to help those who sought his aid, Jewish leaders say. Odessa's chief rabbi, Avraham Wolff, credits him for giving the community a building for a Jewish orphanage.

"He is not a religious person but he

did what he can to help the community," Wolff said.

Mikhail Frenkel, head of the Association of Jewish Media in Ukraine, says one shouldn't make too much of these mayors' ethnic backgrounds. "None of the ethnic Jews in the Ukrainian establishment did anything for the development

of the Ukrainian Jewish community," he said. "These mayors are just ethnic Jews, and they were elected as individuals," not because they are Jewish.

Gurvitz acknowledged that he never wanted to take an active part in Jewish communal life

but Jewish issues and Israel are important parts of his life. On his desk are several souvenirs he brought back from Israel, where his former wife and son have lived for 17 years.

Stanislav, now 23, works at the Haifa port, while a daughter, Eugenia, lives in Kiev.

Gurvitz backed President Viktor Yuschenko during the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, and is a member of the leadership of Yuschenko's Our Ukraine Party.

Yet as mayor he tries to be as apolitical as possible, focusing on his city's economic and social issues. He says his goal is to make Odessa a flourishing resort city and trade center. His co-workers describe him as a workaholic, and he rarely leaves his office before 10 p.m.

Although he still considers himself a Yuschenko supporter, he does not hang any pictures in his office of the president, whose performance in office has fallen short of expectations. He has never displayed photos of any political leader, he says.

Instead, there is a portrait of Soviet nuclear physicist and human rights champion Andrei Sakharov, the same picture Gurvitz has carried with him from office to office throughout his political career, testimony, perhaps, to the universalism to which he aspires.

The mayor of Odessa is a very businesslike person, and his Jewish character and Jewish mentality help him to succeed.

Josef Zissels

Ukrainian Jewish leader

NEWS IN BRIEF

WORLD

Anti-Semitic incidents surge in Britain

There's been a significant increase in anti-Semitic incidents during the past month, the group responsible for the safety of Britain's Jews reported. The majority of incidents involved hate mail, e-mails, verbal abuse and graffiti on Jewish property, the Community Security Trust said in a statement.

"The risk of a terrorist attack has been raised by overseas events. This is in addition to the considerable existing terror threat from domestic U.K. pro-Al-Qaida sources," the group said.

The trust urged British Jewish communities to follow security measures and cooperate with security personnel at all times. Synagogue congregants were urged to disperse immediately after services, among other steps.

Jewish girl beaten on London bus

A Jewish girl was kicked unconscious on a public bus in London last week.

The girl, 12, and a friend boarded the bus, followed by a group of four girls and three boys. One of the group approached the Jewish girl and asked if she was Jewish; she replied "I'm English."

The four girls then pushed her to the floor, stomped on her face and repeatedly kicked her.

The boys, who were not involved in the attack, stood guard while it was carried out. The Jewish girl's friend, who was wearing rosary beads, was not harmed.

Christian teachings in Russian schools opposed

The teaching of Orthodox Christianity in public schools will hurt Jews and other minorities in Russia, a Russian Jewish leader said.

Berel Lazar, one of Russia's two chief rabbis, said Wednesday in an interview with a Moscow radio station that the introduction in four Russian regions of a new subject called the "Foundations of Russian Orthodox Culture" will "divide children into different classes" and ostracize minorities.

The new subject will become obligatory in certain regions of central Russia starting Friday. The curriculum change was first reported Wednesday.

MIDDLE EAST

Hezbollah firm on swap

Hezbollah says it won't relent on its demand to release two captive Israeli soldiers only as part of a prisoner swap. "There is no unconditional release. It is not feasible," Energy Minister Mohammed Fneish, a Hezbollah representative in the Lebanese government, said Wednesday.

Hezbollah captured Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev in a July 12 border raid that also killed eight soldiers, and the group insists on releasing them only in exchange for hundreds of Arab prisoners in Israeli prisons.

Israeli media has speculated that Prime Minister Ehud Olmert would settle for a compromise whereby three Lebanese prisoners go free.

Syrian group threatens abductions

An obscure Syrian terrorist group threatened to abduct Israeli soldiers. In a statement read by Al-Jazeera television Wednesday, the Men of the National Resistance vowed to emulate the border kidnapping tactics of Hezbollah in order to bargain for the release of Syrians held in Israeli prisons.

According to the report, the apparently new group operates in

the Golan Heights. Israeli security sources played down the threat, noting that the Golan is populated by Israeli Jews or by Druse who, while professing loyalty to Syria, generally are peaceful.

Terror tunnel uncovered

Israeli forces foiled a Palestinian plot to blow up a position on the Gaza border.

Military officials announced Wednesday that forces operating in Gaza City's Shajaiya district had uncovered a tunnel leading to the nearby Karni crossing on the border with Israel.

Terrorists are believed to have dug the 40-foot-deep passage with the intent of planting explosives underneath Israeli installations at Karni.

At least 13 Palestinians, most of them gunmen, have been killed while trying to drive Israeli troops out of Shajaiya.

NORTH AMERICA

Jackson meets Israeli hostages' families

The Rev. Jesse Jackson met the families of three kidnapped Israeli soldiers.

Jackson said Wednesday that he told the families of Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev that the two men, kidnapped by Hezbollah in July, are alive.

Jackson recently met in Syria with Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal.

ADL blasts Annan for Iran visit

The Anti-Defamation League came out against Kofi Annan's plan to meet the Iranian president.

The national director of the ADL, Abraham Foxman, said Wednesday that the U.N. secretary-general's talks with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Tehran this weekend would be akin to meeting with Hitler.

"This is a man who time and again has vowed to destroy Israel and who openly questions the Holocaust," Foxman said.

Annan, who was in Jerusalem on Wednesday as part of a regional tour to consolidate the U.N.-brokered cease-fire between Israel and Hezbollah, defended the planned meeting, saying it was his job to maintain contacts with international leaders.

Rabbi at interfaith 9/11 event

A Reform Jewish leader will join a Muslim and an Eastern Orthodox cleric in a prayer for peace at an Arab American event marking the Sept. 11 attacks.

Rabbi David Saperstein, the director of Reform's Religious Action Center, will join Imam Mohamed Majid, who leads a Washington area mosque, and Rev. George Rados, who leads an Eastern Orthodox Church, at the Arab American Institute's fifth anniversary commemorations of the terrorist attacks.

The commemorations come in the middle of the institute's Sept. 10-12 national leadership conference, and will include briefings on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and on Israel's recent war in Lebanon.

Calif. mayor won't apologize

A mayor in California refused to apologize for bestowing an honor on a Palestinian who called Hezbollah an "amateur in terrorism compared with Israel."

Santa Cruz Mayor Cynthia Mathews provoked the ire of local Jewish leaders earlier this month when she presented a key to the city to Afif Safieh, a longtime member of the PLO, at a talk in front of 250 people, according to the Santa Cruz Sentinel.

Mathews said the gesture was not a means of taking sides in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but was meant to endorse Safieh's vision of a two-state solution.