



Snatching Eichmann

By Yaakov Astor



Zman interviewed Rafi Eitan, commander of the Mossad team that pulled off the highly dramatic capture of Adolf Eichmann. Supplemented with insights from the one person most intimately involved with all the operational details, this is the gripping account filled with surprising twists and turns, told from beginning to end. Today the Mossad has earned the reputation as a highly sophisticated organization using state-of-the-art technology, but back then it was an unknown, underfunded organization operating in a foreign land, without weapons or communications, and using things like old escape cars that could break down at any moment. Read about the hashgachah that helped turn a potential disaster into one of the most spectacularly successful undercover operations in history.

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Night's shadow engulfs the outskirts of San Fernando, a suburb of Buenos Aires, capital of Argentina. A black car pulls up to Garibaldi Street. The street is little more than a poorly paved road near a large, empty field, with a small, lone one-story concrete house in the middle.

The car stops. Four men get out and open the hood. Though dressed like Argentine locals, they are not who they appear to be. In fact, they are secret agents from the Israeli spy organization, the Mossad, sent 9,000 miles away to look for a short, skinny, 51-year-old man.

That man, too, is not as he appears to be, but is someone with the blood of six million on his hands. He is none other than the "Architect of the Final Solution," Adolf Eichmann, and the Israelis are there not to kill him, but to abduct him and bring him back alive to Israel so that he can stand trial...

Rafi Eitan - Field Commander

It is hard to imagine how Rafael "Rafi" Eitan, the disarmingly friendly, elderly gentleman whom *Zman* interviewed for this story, was once the most daring and fearsome intelligence field commander in the Israeli secret service, involved in the most dangerous and clandestine operations.

Born in 1923 on a kibbutz during the era of the British Mandate of Palestine, his parents were immigrants from Russia. He joined the Haganah at age 12 and graduated to the more elite Palmach division upon completion of high school in 1944. He assisted Holocaust survivors who were fleeing the Nazis and sneaking into Palestine, since the British had made these survivors' entry illegal. One of his first major operations was to blow up the British radar on Mount Carmel near the port city of Haifa.

His reputation as an army intelligence operational specialist grew during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War and continued from there. He told *Zman* that as early as 1950



Adolf Eichmann in 1942.

he had already worked with many of the team members that would eventually be put together to abduct Eichmann. One of the friends he made during those years was Isser Harel, who became the first director of Israel's internal security agency, Shin Bet, and who later took over the Mossad a year after it was created in 1951. It was this relationship that led to his involvement in the Eichmann operation.

"I had known Isser for many years," Eitan told us. "In 1958, Ben-Gurion called Isser and instructed him with the following: 'Your duty now is to bring to Israel one of the ex-Nazis—not for revenge, but to stand trial in Israel.'"

Although Ben-Gurion had not yet chosen Eichmann as the Nazi to abduct (they didn't know where he was in 1958), it was clear that the mission would be extremely dangerous physically as well as diplomatically. If it failed, they not only risked the lives of the agents but it could prove fatal to the already

fragile international political standing of the nascent Jewish state. Therefore, when Isser Harel needed the best man for the job he turned to none other than Rafi Eitan.

Who Was Adolf Eichmann?

Adolf Eichmann had risen in the ranks of the SS, earning the reputation as its "Jewish specialist," and eventually joined the Jewish Affairs department of the Reich Central Security Office (RSHA), headed by the infamous Reinhard Heydrich, "Hitler's Hangman." (It is remarkable that RSHA—short for, *Reichssicherheitshauptamt*—became known by initials that spell out *rasha*, the Hebrew word for "evildoer." RSHA was the part of the SS that controlled the Gestapo, the secret political police of the security service—and ultimately was responsible for carrying out the Final Solution.) As Heydrich's primary assistant, Eichmann was present at the infamous Wannsee Conference on January 20, 1942, where Heydrich convened a top-secret meeting of high-ranking Nazi brass to streamline the systematic extermination of Europe's Jews and to implement the Final Solution.

After Wannsee, Eichmann was made the Transportation Administrator, which put him in charge of all the trains that would carry Jews to the death camps in Poland. Trains played a pivotal role in the Final Solution. Most Jews under Nazi dominion had been corralled into ghettos from the beginning of the war. There they were starved, beaten, murdered, allowed to die of disease and/or sent to labor camps, where they were literally worked to death. The Final Solution, however, demanded a different type of camp: death camps. These were built specifically for one purpose: extermination. Rather than bringing the killers to the Jews, the camps made it possible to bring the Jews to the killers.

To get the Jews from the ghettos to the death camps required, first of all, the use of Europe's highly complex train system. In



The International Red Cross identity document Adolf Eichmann used to enter Argentina in 1950 under the name Riccardo Klement, issued by the Italian delegation of the Red Cross of Geneva.



Reinhard Heydrich (right), who chaired the Wannsee conference, here with Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS, which was given the task of carrying out Hitler's goal to exterminate the Jews.

addition to civilian needs, trains were the means of moving large amounts of supplies, weapons and soldiers from place to place. This is where Eichmann's contribution was instrumental. As Transportation Administrator, it was he who overcame the challenges and complexities of acquiring the trains and making tracks available for his Jewish victims. With the trains at the Nazis' disposal and the massive task