

to tell them about Mengele's demise and the location of the grave.

On June 6, 1985, a vast crowd consisting of hundreds of police and reporters, gathered at the small cemetery to watch gravediggers unearth the grave of Wolfgang Gerhard, Mengele's assumed name. Unable to dislodge the coffin, the gravediggers were ordered to smash the lid, and soon they started to extricate a grisly collection of bones and shreds of clothing. At one point, the morgue's director, Jose Antonio de Mello, picked up a skull and held it high for the photographers.

On June 21, 1985, the forensic team, comprising six American scientists, reported that the "skeleton was that of Josef Mengele, within a reasonable scientific certainty." Additional evidence was supplied by Dr. Richard Helmer from the University of Kiel, who carried out the relatively new process of "electronic supra position," which merged photographs of Mengele's face with that of the unearthed skull. The resulting images were extremely eerie and helped to convince many that the skull belonged to the Auschwitz doctor. Despite the strength of evidence, however, there were those who



Mengele in 1956. Photo taken by a police photographer in Buenos Aires for Mengele's Argentine identification document.

still doubted it was Mengele and continued searching for him.

Rumors of his supernatural abilities at the head of a powerful Nazi underground notwithstanding, Mengele spent most of his years in constant fear, ultimately meeting his fate—homesick and alone. ■

# "The Pollard debacle weighs on my conscience"

## The ups and downs of Rafi Eitan's career



- Yakov M. Hirschson

It's not every day that one meets with the likes of Rafi Eitan. The man is a living legend; a database of decades of accumulated espionage knowledge and trivia, most of which he will probably take to his grave. He is a veteran of countless successful operations and, of course, has also experienced some failures and even some disasters.

When interviewing such an individual, you know that there is more held back than revealed. Nonetheless, **Zman** did its best to squeeze out as much as we could during our interview with this fascinating personality.

Rafi Eitan was born Rafael Hantman in 1926, the oldest of four children of Noach

and Yehudit (née Volwelsky). This couple had emigrated from Russia to Palestine in 1923. The Hantmans considered themselves *chalutzim*, or pioneers, belonging to the Zionist movement. They had begun using *Ivrit* at home while still living in Russia.

Noach, a farmer and poet, served in the Russian army. His parents obtained the necessary papers for the family to leave for Turkey. The family spent a year in Istanbul on a farm that the Zionists used as a training camp. Once they were considered sufficiently proficient in basic agricultural techniques they were sent to Palestine. There they settled on the Ein Harod kibbutz in the north.

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Rafi's maternal grandfather was a wealthy lumber merchant, and in 1928 he purchased land in Palestine for all five of his children. The Hartmans—or Eitans, as they now called themselves—owned their own parcel in Ramat HaSharon, a city near Tel Aviv, which was then a small settlement numbering 100 families. Rafi learned agriculture in school and later studied economics.

## In the Military

At the age of 12, the eldest Eitan child joined the Haganah, the Zionists' militia. His goal was to protect Jewish settlers against the attacks of Arab insurgents. Rafi did so well that he was inducted into the Palmach, the Haganah's elite and secret commando unit.

The Eitan boy was a brave fighter and excelled in illegally smuggling his fellow Jews into the country. One of his most celebrated escapades involved blowing up a British radar station on Har Carmel, overlooking the port of Haifa. That radar installment was used by the British to detect ships approaching the harbor illegally. To reach the station unseen, Eitan had to crawl through underground sewer pipes. He ignored the extremely unpleasant conditions and succeeded in reaching his target and destroying it.

In 1947, Eitan participated in a daring Palmach operation to free the Jewish prisoners being held in the Atlit detainment camp outside Haifa. There the British authorities had interned thousands of illegal Jewish immigrants, most of them Holocaust survivors. The prison camp was surrounded by barbed wire fence and guard towers. Eitan's task was to plant mines along the way to prevent the British army from reaching the camp once the operation began. The "mines" were little more than jelly jars packed with explosives.

Eitan was standing too close to one of these improvised devices when a car drove over it. He was wounded in the resulting explosion and both of his ears suffered

damage. He later described the experience, saying, "It was a very moving scene when we reached the *ma'apilim* (interned immigrants) and brought them to freedom."

Later, Eitan was wounded again in fighting against the Arabs at Malkia, a kibbutz near the border with Lebanon. He lost part of his ankle at the time, and to this day he finds it difficult to walk on unpaved paths. But Eitan would not let himself be removed from the fighting. At the end of the first truce in the 1948 war, Israel launched a military offensive called Mivtza Dani and Eitan took part in it—still wearing a cast on his foot. When his commander, subsequent Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin, saw Eitan's condition, he yelled at him, "Rafi, what are you doing? You don't belong on the battlefield. Go home!"

## The World of Espionage

Ever the adventurer, Eitan found that he could not sit still. If he could not fight in the military, he would find a job fighting as a spy. He soon launched a long and colorful career in the field of espionage. His technical mastery of the skills required of spies quickly earned him the rank of officer.

In 1948, Isser Harel founded the Shin Bet, Israel's internal security force. He initiated a search for young prodigies to staff his organization, and his eye quickly fell on Rafi Eitan.

When we asked Eitan what unique qualities he had that brought Harel to him, he laughed. "I never thought I was a prodigy. I am a creative person who knows how to come up with a solution. I am full of energy throughout life, although when someone asks me I say I was born tired. On the one hand I am full of energy, and on the other I also love to sleep!"

After a number of years of service in the Shin Bet, Eitan transferred to the Mossad. Because of his connections in both agencies, Eitan was appointed as the Chief Coordinator for Israel's intelligence community. This position would lead to his involvement in Israel's most publicized intelligence triumph

ever: the capture of Adolf Eichmann. Eitan's uncanny ability to maintain his composure during a crisis was one of the qualities that led to his being chosen for the team that would apprehend the arch-Nazi in 1960.

The next major operation in which Eitan was involved was when his unit helped uncover and arrest Yisrael Bar, a former lieutenant colonel in the IDF who was found to be spying for the Soviet Union.

Bar played a leading role in the early years of the State of Israel as a close confidante of Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion. He was also a well-known military commentator and an acknowledged expert on military history, and was employed in a civilian position within the Israeli Ministry of Defense to write a book on the history of the Israeli War of Independence.

Because of his standing and the high esteem in which Ben-Gurion held him, he was able to attend top-secret staff meetings and had access to whatever information he asked for. Army plans, blueprints, and defense documents of the highest classification all passed through his hands.

According to an article by Doron Geller, "He was able to achieve the prominence he did because he managed to fool everyone about his background, including the Prime Minister himself. That is, he managed to fool almost everyone—except for the sharp-eyed Isser Harel, head of the Mossad and Shin Bet."

The story that Bar told was that he was born in Austria to parents who were assimilated Jews. He had studied in the University of Vienna, where he received his doctorate. He took part in street fighting in Vienna against the Nazis in 1934 and later fought in the Spanish Civil War under the anti-Nazi International Brigade.

In fact, every aspect of that story is questionable. The popular belief is that Bar was a successful con artist who may not even have been Jewish at all. His fabricated background allowed him to earn the confidence of Israel's top officials and thereby gain access to the state's most guarded secrets.

Under interrogation, Bar repeated his



Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak (L) talks with Rafi Eitan before a weekly cabinet meeting, May 25, 2008, in Jerusalem.

oft-told story, but Isser Harel calmly told him, "You are a liar. We can find no trace of your parents in Austria. If they were typical Jewish parents, as you make them out to be, then why aren't you circumcised? We have checked all the records in Austria. You never fought on the barricades. You never received a doctorate, as you claim, nor did you ever attend the university. You did not go to the military academy because Jews were not allowed to at the time. They have checked their lists for us and your name is not there. The *Schutzbund* has no record of your membership either. We have gone through the records of the International Brigade and your name is not there. You never fought in Spain. Now tell me: Who are you? We want the truth."

Bar never revealed his true identity, just as he never admitted to spying against Israel for the Soviet Union.

Rafi Eitan spoke to us about how Bar was arrested:

*The evening before the arrest, I had returned from London. When I was still in the airport, my staff contacted me and reported that a chase was in progress. Of course I went right down to headquarters to manage the events from there. When the squad that was following Bar identified him as the Soviet spy, I called Isser Harel, who gave the order to arrest him immediately rather than*