

36 Years Later...

- Moshe Miller

Miracles at Entebbe

This month marks 36 years since the stunning rescue by Israeli commandos of 102 hostages held in Entebbe, Uganda. While looking back at the epic mission, Zman traveled to Antwerp to get the firsthand account of Gilbert Weill, who was rescued on that fateful day.

Sunday, June 27, 1976

Gilbert (Dov Ber) Weill and his wife, Helen, were standing in front of the Air France flight desk in Lod Airport, near Tel Aviv. This trip to *Eretz Yisrael* had seemed too short, as usual, but their schedule demanded that they return home to Antwerp, Belgium, as soon as possible. First they would have to go to Paris, then to Metz to pick up their children and finally they would return home.

"I'm sorry, sir," the overly polite airline representative told Mr. Weill, "but your flight has been delayed. Your plane originated in Bombay and continued on to Teheran, where conditions aren't allowing for takeoff at the moment. The plane will arrive at least two hours late."

"We are on a very tight schedule," a disappointed Mr. Weill told the man behind the desk. "Are there any other options?"

The Air France employee checked the flight lists. "Actually, there is a plane leaving for Paris in just an hour which has several empty seats."

"Oh, wonderful, we'll take it!" Mr. Weill replied.

As he and his wife walked away from the desk, they met an acquaintance who was supposed to take the same delayed flight. "Quick," Mr. Weill advised him, "get on the earlier flight before all the seats are taken. Who knows how long that other plane is going to be delayed!"

The Weills boarded Air France flight 139. They were delighted to be landing in Paris on time to make the trip to Metz at a reasonable hour. There they would stay overnight with Gilbert's parents before setting out early the next day for the three-and-a-half hour drive, across the French-Belgian border, to Antwerp.

After less than two hours in the air, the twin-engined wide-body Airbus A300 jetliner began its descent toward Athens, Greece, for a scheduled stopover. Mr. Weill hoped there wouldn't be any unexpected delays. The plane landed and taxied toward the

terminal. The passengers patiently waited for the plane to refuel and 56 additional passengers to board.

For Giorgos Papadopoulos, the X-ray technician on duty at the Athens International Airport security checkpoint, it was another boring day scanning the luggage and personal belongings of thousands of humdrum, law-abiding passengers. He yawned, turning the page of his newspaper as the new passengers for Air France flight 139 filed through. He barely gave his monitoring screen a second glance.

The metal detector a short distance away beeped now and then, but he wasn't concerned. Kostas, who usually manned the metal detector, was out to lunch—but, in any event, he never found anything suspicious.

*

Helen Weill watched disinterestedly as the passengers filed down the aisles of the economy class section and found their seats. Suddenly, her eyes widened. She caught her husband's attention and surreptitiously motioned toward the front of the plane. "Arabs!" she whispered. Then, after a short pause, "Maybe we should find another flight...."

But Gilbert thought nothing of it. He simply waved away his wife's concern. After all, they wanted to arrive in France on time.

"There were others who it turned out had missed this plane," Mr. Weill told **Zman**, "and later they were happy that they had not been on it. I was not supposed to be on that flight, but it was *bashert* that I took it."

Hijacked!

As the plane taxied toward the runway, the passengers readied themselves for the two-and-a-half hour flight to Paris. Gilbert opened up a newspaper. As he flipped through it, he noticed an article about Idi Amin Dada, Uganda's eccentric, erratic, flamboyant and ruthless dictator. Just two days prior, on June 25, 1976, the eccentric

strongman had been declared "President for Life" by the Ugandan parliament. Gilbert looked at the article for a short while and then turned the page. He glanced out the window and noticed that the plane was sitting at the beginning of the runway, poised for takeoff and awaiting clearance from the tower.

The Weills were sitting in the front of economy class. A few rows behind them, they heard the voice of a young boy asking one of the Arabs what was in the large sack he was carrying. The sack looked like the kind usually used to ship dates.

"Dates for you and grenades for your parents," the Arab retorted. Passengers within earshot probably discounted the comment as empty braggadocio. After all, even though security at Athens Airport was notoriously lax, surely they would at least be competent enough to prevent someone from carrying a bag of grenades on board!

Two minutes after takeoff, at approximately 12:30 PM, Mr. Weill noticed the two Arabs spring out of their seats in economy class and move swiftly toward first class.

Suddenly, there was a ruckus in the front of the plane. A scuffle ensued, followed by a shriek of terror. Those sitting in economy weren't sure what was happening until, to their horror, all of the first class passengers began running toward the rear of the plane with their hands raised above their heads.

The Weills, along with everyone sitting in the front of economy class, were ordered to get up from their seats and sit on the floor in the back of the plane. They still weren't sure exactly what was happening—but terrorists



The terrorists were armed with hand grenades such as this one, as well as automatic rifles and other weapons.



A terminal at Ben Gurion International Airport, formerly known as Lod Airport.