

The CIA's Master Of Disguise An Interview With Tony Mendez

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The Agent Who Saved Israel From Nuclear Destruction

Zman speaks to legendary CIA operative Tony Mendez, the man who revolutionized modern espionage through the ingenious use of disguise. Intimately involved in countless top-secret operations, the colorful master of deception stands out even in the cloak-and-dagger world of international intrigue. Though arguably his most heralded feat is the incredibly daring rescue of trapped Americans during the 1979 Iran hostage crisis, he also played a crucial role uncovering a Soviet plot to use nuclear weapons against Israel during the Yom Kippur War

Tony Mendez sweated profusely and his heart pounded like a bass drum. The information he had just heard sent his mind reeling.

He was sitting across the table from one of America's most valuable informers. And the man had just revealed to Mendez, as well as to a fellow CIA officer known as "Simon," that the world was on the brink of nuclear Armageddon—with the Jews in *Eretz Yisrael* at its center!

The informer tried not to appear nervous as he lit a cigarette. He was wearing an expensive, carefully pressed suit. His attaché case lay at his side and his features indicated a European background. Everything about the man created the impression of a respected, Western businessman.

However, he was no "Western businessman."

Rather than Caucasian in look and complexion, he was Asian with brownish skin. Rather than a non-descript foreign businessman, he was a very visible, high-ranking government official who was easily recognizable. Rather than clandestinely meeting in some underground bunker, they were sharing a drink in "plain sight" in the villa of a well-known person who often entertained diplomats and local officials.

Although he had long been sharing information with the Americans—for the right price—even the great monetary incentive was not enough in this case. The informer had recently been promoted by his government and the city was swarming with agents and informers who would recognize him in an instance. The risk was too great...

Until Tony Mendez convinced him otherwise.

Mendez proved to this government minister that there was nothing to fear. He could disguise him so well that he could share his critical information right under the noses of the local security service. And that is exactly what this government minister was doing at that moment, as he sat

there in his crisp, Western business suit.

The information he had just told Mendez and Simon was incredible. The year was 1973. Egypt, Syria and their Arab allies had launched a devastating surprise attack against the Jewish state on the holiest day of the year, Yom Kippur. At great cost of life, Israel (with great *siyaatah dishmaya*) had managed to reverse the momentum and now threatened to annihilate the armies that had attacked her. But now, the two Americans had just found out that the Soviets had moved nuclear weapons into the area.

They were staring in the face of World War III....

Mendez's Biography

Tony Mendez was one of the most daring agents in the CIA. He is numbered among the elite few to ever earn the Intelligence Star, the agency's second highest honor, which is awarded for "voluntary act or acts of courage performed under hazardous conditions or for outstanding achievements or services rendered with distinction under conditions of grave risk."

That is quite an accomplishment for a man who began his career as an artist. Who would have guessed that one day he would carry out not only extremely risky intelligence missions under the enemy's noses, but that some of those missions would help shape the course of history?

We met with Mr. Mendez in his home outside Washington DC. It is located on a 40-acre plot in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Mendez built the entire complex, including the studio where he did his disguise work, with his own hands.

To reach the complex we drove over narrow, unpaved roads and stony paths. I pointed out to our driver and photographer that the entire setting reflected the nature of the secretive man we would soon be interviewing. This meeting had taken us over a year to arrange.

The estate is home for Tony and his wife Jonna, both former CIA officers. The



The complex of buildings that Mendez built with his own hands gives one the immediate feeling that this is the residence of a larger-than-life figure.

Mendezes each served as the CIA's Chief of Disguise and their combined experience amounts to 52 years of service. Like her husband, Mrs. Mendez has an impressive history behind her. The many colorful details she provided regarding some of the astounding espionage stories her husband shared added much to our interview. Mrs. Mendez herself played a role in some of these incidents.

Antonio Mendez was born in 1940 to an indigent family in the mining town of Eureka, Nevada—a town known as "the loneliest town on the loneliest road in America." His father, John Mendez, worked in the local copper mines and died in a tragic accident at the age of 23 when a wagon of coal tipped over onto him. Tony became an orphan before he turned three.

Mendez's mother with her four young children moved in to her own mother's home. Her maternal grandfather was an Italian immigrant named J. C. Tognoni who had arrived in America penniless at the age of 15. He struck it rich during the mining boom of the last century, briefly becoming the richest man in the state. Then he lost it all on a bad investment in another mine.



Tony Mendez working at his studio, in his house, outside Washington DC. It is located on a 40-acre plot in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains.



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