

An Insider's Harrowing Account of...

The Munich Massacre

Yitzchok Wagschal



Munich, Germany – the birthplace of Nazism. The year is 1972, more than 27 years after the end of World War II and the horrors of the Holocaust. Israeli athletes, waving a large flag with its prominent Star of David, walk through the Olympic Stadium in the opening ceremony—a particularly poignant image contrasted to the one, just 36 years earlier, of Nazi athletes strutting past a beaming Adolf Hitler, arms outstretched in the Nazi salute, carrying a swastika-embroidered flag during the 1936 Olympics hosted in Berlin.

This was to be a new Olympics, symbolizing a new Germany with a new feeling of universal brotherhood and peace for all mankind. And that's the way things began. . . .

Then tragedy struck. Arab terrorists infiltrated the Olympic Village and seized Israeli athletes, sparking memories of the Holocaust in the land that perpetrated it. The entire world literally watched the horrific events unfold and wondered: Would negotiators and commandos be able to save the Jewish athletes in time?

Zman interviewed Shmuel Lalkin, then head of the Israeli Olympic delegation, who was only a few feet away in the neighboring apartment at the time of the attack. He provides a harrowing and chilling insider's account of this major historical event.

August 23, 1972

Frankfurt, West Germany

To the naked eye, it seemed like any other day at the Frankfurt Airport. Like thousands of others, a man and woman traveling as a couple made their way through the crowd, hoping that they would not arouse any suspicion. The man waited anxiously for the four large pieces of luggage that he had checked in to show up on the conveyor belt. They had already passed through security at their point of origin, but the man knew that going through customs in Germany would be a much greater challenge than passing through security in Algeria.

As each of the suitcases rolled by, the “husband” took them and placed them on a trolley. The two started toward the exit doors. They had no inkling as to the contents of these suitcases. They knew only one thing: if detected, a major mission would be in jeopardy.

They stood in line, nervously looking around, trying to act like a regular husband and wife traveling for business. At the customs desk, the Arab couple presented Algerian passports, explaining that they were visiting to conduct business in Germany. The clerk stamped the passports, and they were on their way.

The couple was almost at the exit when a young, tall German customs officer asked them to step to the side for an inspection of their four identical suitcases. The husband started yelling, “Why are you discriminating against us? This is such an embarrassment! I travel all around the world for business; never have I been singled out like this.”

The officer was not fazed. He had seen this before. They always put up a show, but in the end they recognize that they have been caught and can do nothing about it. The Arab man asked, now in a low tone, which he should open first.

The officer pointed to one. He opened it. It had been strategically jam-packed with a large amount of women’s clothing so that its contents would burst out upon opening. The



The new main terminal at Frankfurt Airport was completed in March, 1972.



A Kalashnikov, also known as an AK-47. Until 1974, it was called the AKM. The Arab terrorists smuggled in AK-47s, among other weapons.

man made sure to “mistakenly” drop the clothing all over the floor. His “wife” covered her face with her hands, shedding tears of shame and humiliation, “Oh my G-d, this is so embarrassing.”

The young customs officer, feeling bad for the couple, apologized and said, “I’ve seen enough; you can go now.” The man wiped the sweat off his forehead. The other suitcases were not opened. Mission accomplished. They left the terminal without further incident, rented a car and drove over 300 miles to Munich, stopping only for fuel.

In reality, the “businessman” and his “wife” were low-level operatives of Fatah, an Arab revolutionary group (today a political party) dedicated to the destruction of Israel, and part of the terrorist Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). All they knew about their mission was that, somehow, their actions were furthering the struggle of the Arabs against the Zionist state.

In Munich, the couple rented a large locker at the central train station and placed the luggage in the locker. They proceeded to

leave the keys with a concierge at a nearby hotel, as per the instructions given them. A short time later, a member of the Black September terrorist organization, secretly a branch of Fatah, stopped by to pick up the keys.

Upon receiving the news that this leg of the mission was a success, the leaders of Black September were ecstatic. The suitcases—which were crammed with eight AK-47s, dozens of magazines loaded with 7.62 mm bullets, as well as ten grenades—had arrived safely! This was a major milestone. For months the terrorists had been on edge about how to smuggle in the weapons needed for their operation. Now they were that much closer to carrying out their diabolical plans.

Germany Reborn

The Summer Olympics of 1972 was supposed to emphasize a special message, carefully planned by the postwar West German government. Thirty-six years earlier, in August 1936, the Olympic Games were held in Germany under a backdrop of anti-Semitism. Hitler actively sought to deny Jewish athletes, as well as blacks, the right to compete. Certain nations, including the United States, threatened to boycott the 1936 Olympics, until finally Hitler relented. The games were attended by Hitler himself, and he exploited the world stage to promote Nazi ideology. The rehabilitated West Germany of 1972, a mere 27 years after the end of the Holocaust, wanted to show the world that it had transformed completely since the Nazi era.

Every nation that hosts the Olympics seeks to convey a certain message to the world. Some want to showcase their athletic prowess; others emphasize their architectural abilities. Germany designed every detail of the 1972 games to portray a peaceful, tranquil atmosphere. This message of nonviolence was so important that they even opted to deliberately rely on minimal security at the games. They did not want to have security personnel walking around

with weapons, reminding visitors and the world of their police-state past. This marked lack of security was detected by the visiting head of the Israeli Olympic delegation, Shmuel Lalkin.

Born and raised in *Eretz Yisrael*, Lalkin was a fighter in the Palmach, the elite fighting force and part of the underground army of the Yishuv (Jewish community) during the period of the British Mandate for Palestine. He was captured and imprisoned for two years by the British. Upon his release, he joined the Haganah and fought in the War of Independence, climbing to the rank of major. Lalkin’s tall, broad physique and thick mustache commanded respect even from those who didn’t know him personally. In his personal life, he was a warm, loving husband and father.

Lalkin was eventually appointed to the post of General Secretary of Israel Sports Division. He led the Israeli sports teams in many international competitions, and



Adolf Hitler arriving to the opening ceremony of the 1936 Olympics.



Opening ceremony of the 1936 Olympics.