

Angel Of Rescue

The storied career of Rabbi Rafael "Ronnie" Greenwald begins with his legendary activism and the unique role he played in dozens of high-profile spy-swap deals between the US and the Soviet Union. And he accomplished it all without the help of a college education or training in diplomacy or espionage. In fact, his only formal schooling was yeshivah. Yet, after he was unexpectedly drawn into these fields, he experienced success beyond anyone's wildest imagination. In this sweeping interview, he recounts many incredible and dramatic experiences—some for the first time—involving the rescue of Jews in seemingly hopeless predicaments.



It was a pleasant spring day as Rabbi Rafael “Ronnie” Greenwald sat in a Brooklyn restaurant with Shabtai Kalmanovich, an undercover KGB agent who had provided the rabbi tremendous assistance on many occasions to free Jewish prisoners.

Suddenly, Rabbi Greenwald felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned and saw a face he had never seen before. “Can I ask you something?” the man asked in an Italian accent.

“Yes.”

“Do you know Evsay Agran?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Tell him that if he doesn’t give us the money he owes us, blood will be spilled in the streets.”

“Excuse me,” Rabbi Greenwald reacted with a mixture tension and anger, “who are you?”

“Ask the restaurant owner. He’ll tell you.”

When Rabbi Greenwald asked him who that man was, the owner of the eatery tightened up. “He is a member of the Colombo crime family!” he replied nervously.

Ronnie Greenwald knew Agran very well. Several years prior, he was sitting in the lobby of a Berlin hotel during one of his secretive diplomatic missions, when a Russian suddenly approached and identified himself as Evsay Agran. He wanted to ask for a favor; the “I’d like to send a package with you” kind of favor. When Ronnie Greenwald returned to America, Agran wanted him to take along a painting worth \$100,000. “This is a religious article. No one will bother you about bringing religious articles into America.”

Of course, Rabbi Greenwald categorically refused the request, but he got into a conversation with the stranger nonetheless. Agran was a Soviet Jew, one among hundreds of thousands who had been forcibly torn from their heritage by communist ideology and oppression.

In 1975, Agran left the Soviet Union and arrived in America. There he joined the Russian Mafia based in the Brighton Beach section of Brooklyn, and soon he became the gang’s leader. From time to time he would appear at Rabbi Greenwald’s office, though



Rabbi Rafael Greenwald, better known in the halls of the intelligence community as Ronnie.

the rabbi was careful never to do business with him.

Now, though, when he received a message about “blood being spilled in the streets,” Ronnie Greenwald was deeply shaken. Since he had been chosen as the messenger, he felt a responsibility to prevent any bloodshed. He was, after all, an experienced diplomat—though until that day his talents had only been applied toward getting warring countries to sit down at the negotiating table.

Still, if he had succeeded at lifting the tensions between the Soviet Union and United States, he certainly had a good chance at working things out between two Mafia families. Rabbi Greenwald tracked down Agran and asked him what the conflict was all about. “Yes, we owe them \$200,000,” the crime boss told him, “but we’re not going to pay them.”

Agran told the rabbi that the Colombo crime family had stolen a container loaded with Adidas sneakers from the port and sold it to the Russians. They



Evsay Agran, leader of the Russian Mafia.

paid for half of the shipment on the spot and promised to pay the rest in a few weeks. Meanwhile, the FBI found out about the theft and confiscated the entire shipment. Now the Russians refused to make good on their original promise.

“We no pay!” Agran stated in his broken English. “He threaten with blood? We not afraid. We Russian! We survive KGB and gulags. We no afraid of Italian!”

Greenwald was shocked by Agran’s indifference to the situation. Nevertheless, in time he did what he did best: He negotiated a deal between the two sides and avoided bloodshed.

Paradoxical Figure

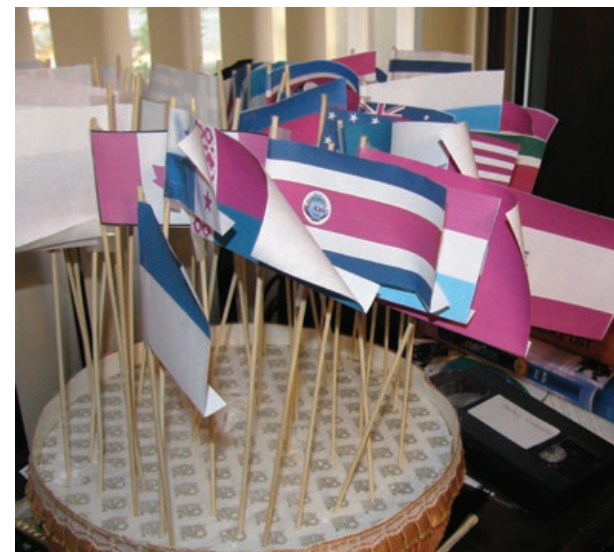
The officer raised his eyebrows and fixed a penetrating stare on the man standing in front of him. Something did not add up. The man wore a *yarmulke* on his head and presented himself as Rabbi Greenwald of Monsey, New York. This information was consistent with his passport and airline ticket. However, what was such a person doing here in Swaziland near the remote border of Mozambique, deep in Africa? And on the first night of Passover?!

Rabbi Greenwald knew exactly what he was doing there; he was waiting for an imprisoned Jew to be released. Near him stood an American congressman who had been warned by a senior official in the State Department that two foreign missionaries had been killed at that precise spot not long before. The congressman was frightened, but Rabbi Greenwald stood firm. “We received the blessing of the great rabbi, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein,” he told the congressman. “There is nothing to worry about.”

This is just one of many stories offering a glimpse into the colorful life of Ronnie Greenwald—stories so numerous and dramatic that legends have grown up around him. For instance, after one of his many successful spy-swap negotiations, the *Washington Post* concluded that he worked for the CIA, KGB, Mossad and the Mafia.

“I contacted the writer of that article and demanded an explanation. ‘How could you write such a thing? Do you have the slightest bit of evidence that this is true?’ I was not working for any of them,” Rabbi Greenwald told *Zman*. “But it’s true that I was familiar with them. How do you think I got Vladimir Raiz out of Russia? Through KGB officials.” (More on that story later.)

Hearing Ronnie Greenwald’s story and seeing the man in person one cannot help but see the paradox. It is hard to believe that this typical-looking ordained rabbi



His passport bears stamps from remote countries around the globe. Shown is a gift from his grandchildren, displaying the flags of some of the countries their grandfather visited in the course of his storybook career.



Rabbi Greenwald with HaRav Yaakov Kaminetsky, zt"l.