

THE MOSSAD'S Master of

Operations

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The Story of
Mike Harari,
Legendary Leader
of the Mossad's
Operational Unit

Few, if any, secret agents have impacted Israel's foreign intelligence agency as dramatically as Michael "Mike" Harari (1927-2014), who served on active duty in the Mossad for a quarter-century and remained in the Mossad's "reserves" well into his eighties! His undercover activities began at the age of 19 when the Palmach assigned him to the "Mossad L'Aliyah Bet"—clandestine Jewish immigration to Eretz Yisrael. Over the course of his life he served expertly in such a wide range of operations as to be almost unheard-of: from helping refuseniks escape the Iron Curtain in a hidden trunk compartment, to recruiting an imam in Khartoum, to eliminating a terrorist in Europe so expertly that law enforcement decided it was an accident, to conducting secret negotiations between US President George H. W. Bush and the dictator of Panama, Manuel Noriega....

Zman interviewed former intelligence officer Aaron J. Klein, a close confidant of Mike Harari, whose seminal 2014 biography offers an unprecedented look into the shadow world of the Mossad. The stories he shares with us have never been published in English.

The activities of "Caesarea," Mossad's secret operations unit, kicked into high gear. They had just received sensitive, highly classified intelligence that Dr. Wadie Haddad, leader of the military wing of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), also known as Black September, was planning a spectacular attack on an Israeli target.

Rome, Italy was a regular refueling stop for El Al flights going from Tel Aviv to New York and back. Haddad formulated a plot in which Arab terrorists would lie in wait in the immediate vicinity of Rome's international airport. At the appointed time, they would fire a shoulder-mounted surface-to-air missile (SAM) at a civilian El-Al jumbo jet as it descended toward the runway, killing hundreds of passengers.

Haddad, the same man who would meticulously plan the Entebbe hijacking several years later (see *Zman* 30—*Tammuz* 5772 / July 2012), had stepped up his attacks against Israel in recent years, especially after a failed Israeli attempt on his life in 1969 in Beirut. Prior to that, he had focused on attacks against Jordan.

Haddad had obtained state-of-the-art, Soviet-made "Strela" SAMs that carried a highly explosive warhead. An Arab operative was to deliver the portable, deadly cargo to the PFLP saboteurs any day.

Michael "Mike" Harari, director of Caesarea, got chills as he read the report. Although his Hebrew name was Michael, the English-language "Mike" had become his brand, so to speak; whenever someone in his circles said "Mike" it only meant one person: him (see below how that came to be).

Now "Mike" closely scrutinized the report. It stated that the operation would take place in the near future. But when?

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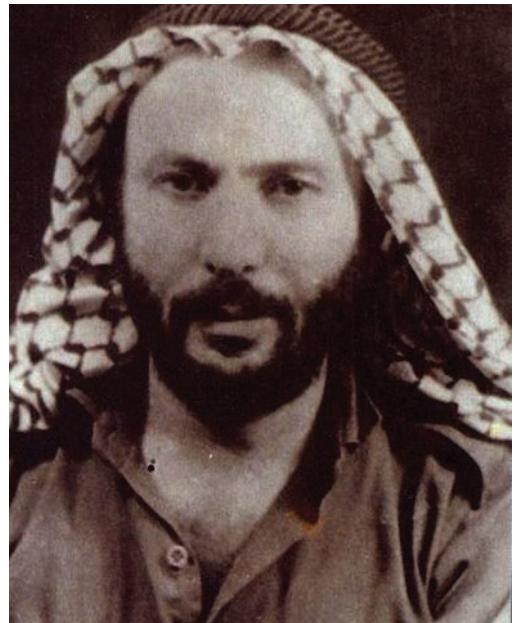
Mike Harari immediately sent a team of 12 to Italy to reconnoiter the area. Several days later, he joined them. The Mossad agents combed the entire zone surrounding Leonardo da Vinci Airport, which was located in Fiumicino, just outside Rome. The

bustling airport, a major intercontinental hub, abutted the Mediterranean and was flanked by parks, beaches, farms, hotels and high-priced villas and apartments. From each vantage point, Mike surveyed the surrounding area. As the sea breeze brushed against his face, he tried to enter the mind of a terrorist, imagining the strategically best point from which to launch a missile toward one of the hundreds of airplanes landing at the airport each day.

His squad had their work cut out for them. Almost anywhere around the airport could serve as a potential launch site. Some agents rented a boat at the Fiumicino Marina and zipped out into the water to evaluate a possible sea attack location. As they watched the huge underbellies of the jets pass over their heads like giant floating targets, their fears only grew.

Mike soberly assessed the situation. It would be impossible to locate the attack and stop it in real time. Any roof, balcony or courtyard in the entire area could serve as a missile launching point for Arab terrorists.

Diverting flights was also problematic. Besides the logistical nightmare, that would serve as an immediate warning sign to



Dr. Wadie Haddad, infamous mastermind of the Black September terrorist organization.

the terrorists that the Israelis were on to them—and they might have time to regroup, pack up and try the exact same thing in Paris or Berlin. Caesarea's efforts in Rome would go to waste, and the next time they might not have such good intelligence. If they neutralized the terror cell here in Rome, however, the Arabs would have difficulty putting together a similar plot again.

Their only hope was to patrol the area, vigilantly looking for anything suspicious.

As always, Mike and his team preferred to remain in the shadows and not draw attention. Taking care to be unseen in a group, they split up. One team prowled through a picturesque wooded area near the airport, hoping desperately to find a group of olive-skinned young men wielding large packages and whispering together in hushed tones in Arabic. Instead, they mostly found young couples out for a stroll in a secluded spot. The others drove through the streets of the Focene and Ostia neighborhoods and around the adjacent farming areas. Mike had spent a lot of time in Rome in the late 1940s and knew the area around the airport well, which was very useful.

They conducted surveillance mostly in mid-morning and late afternoon. The agents had learned that an El-Al Boeing 747 landed each morning at around 10:00 AM. It would refuel and pick up passengers on its way to New York. Then, another one came the opposite way in the afternoon, taking off again at dusk against the backdrop of the breathtaking Mediterranean sunset. These would be the likeliest times the terrorist cell was active.

Soon an alarming new report came in to Caesarea: The terror squad was to receive its Strela surface-to-air missiles imminently. The handover would take place in Rome. Several hours later, the Mossad's high-placed source delivered intelligence that was even more specific. The missiles would be transferred to the terrorists at 9:00 PM that evening, September 4, 1973, near San Paolo Gate in the wall of Rome's old city, constructed in the third century CE.

The Israelis had little time. They hastened



Soviet soldier posing with a Strela SA-7 shoulder-launched anti-aircraft missile.

to the gate, which was teeming with traffic and pedestrians at most hours. They divided the area into numerous surveillance zones and each pair of agents began intense observation. Some were in parked cars and some posed as customers in sidewalk cafés or as innocent passersby.

By 8:00 PM, Mike and his partner were in a car parked on the side of the road. They waited patiently, surveilling the area over and over, even after the appointed time of 9:00 PM had come and gone. Finally, at around 9:40, Mike noticed a Mercedes with diplomatic license plates moving very slowly down the road parallel to the line of parked cars. The driver seemed as if he were trying to locate a specific car.

Finally, the Mercedes stopped just one car away from where Mike's car sat parked. "There's a car over there with diplomatic plates," he remarked to his partner, but he still did not connect it to the operation at hand. A man who looked to be in his 30s exited the Mercedes, quickly approached the car parked on the side of the road and opened the trunk effortlessly. Within a second, the Mossad operatives