

THE MOSSAD'S

# Master of

# Operations

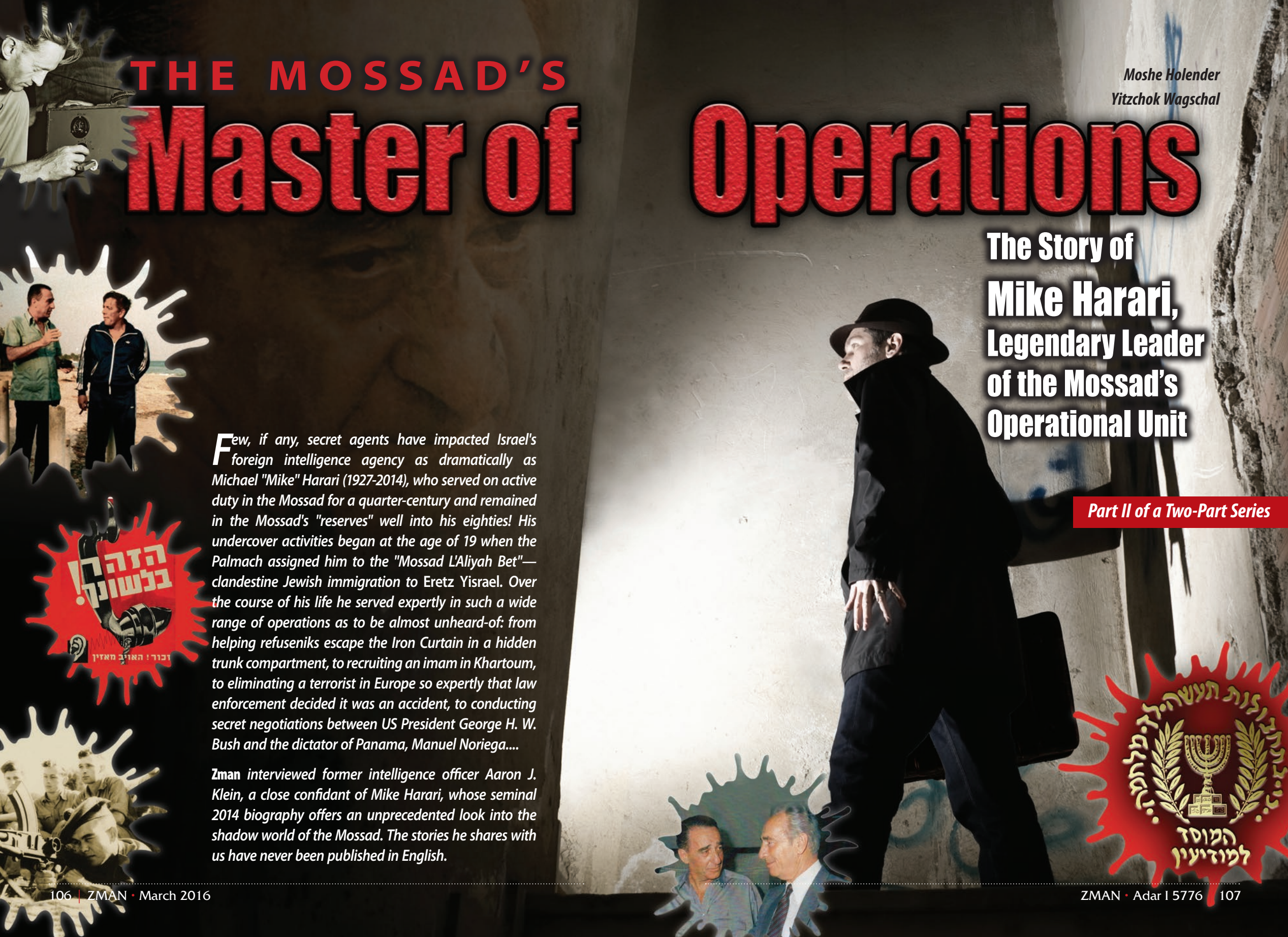
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The Story of  
**Mike Harari,**  
Legendary Leader  
of the Mossad's  
Operational Unit

Part II of a Two-Part Series

**F**ew, 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.



## Part II

*In the last issue, we met Michael "Mike" Harari, the legendary leader of Caesarea, Mossad's special operations unit. We followed him from his time in the Palmach as a young man. As part of his service, he received intensive training as a wireless operator. Stationed in France and Italy to aid in clandestine aliyah to Eretz Yisrael in violation of British quotas, he cleverly escaped British clutches when they captured the SS Shivat Zion en route with hundreds of Moroccan Jewish immigrants.*

*In 1952, Mossad chief Isser Harel drafted him to establish the entire security framework of Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, both at home and in embassies throughout the world. He uncovered numerous electronic eavesdropping devices in several embassies behind the Iron Curtain and survived poisoning by the Soviet secret police.*

*In the mid-1950s, the Mossad assigned him to rescue refuseniks from Soviet countries. They then assigned him to head the Tzomet branch in France, in charge of recruiting foreign operatives to provide intelligence to the Mossad. During that time, he also participated in an extremely dangerous assassination attempt. Although the assassination plan ultimately failed, his part of the mission was a success.*

### From Paris to Asmara

In the spring of 1960, shortly after the failed assassination operation, Isser Harel invited Harari—fondly called "Mike" by those in his close circle—to a surprise meeting. Mike was certain that he wanted to talk about the important agents Tzomet was working with at the time. After a few minutes of conversation, though, Harel declared, "Mike, your talents are going to waste in Paris."

Mike was taken aback, but kept listening. "You're doing a great job here, don't get me wrong," Harel continued, "but I think you've maximized your potential. I want you to keep working on foreign soil, but not in Paris. Mike, I want you to head our Tzomet branch in Ethiopia."

Ethiopia?! Mike and his family loved Paris. They spoke the language and they had many friends. After three years, they felt at home. Now, Harel wanted to send them to live in a Third World country. What would Penina say?

"Ethiopia is a very important country for us," he continued to explain. "It's located south of Sudan, which is south of Egypt. Through Ethiopia, we can reach into Egypt from the back door. Eritrea, located on the

coast, is also strategically very important. Until now, our entire operation there has consisted of one man who works for Aman, military intelligence. Responsibility for the African zone has just been transferred to the Mossad."

"So you want me to live in Addis Ababa?" Mike asked, referring to Ethiopia's bustling capital city.

"No, Eritrea... in the capital, Asmara." At that time, Eritrea was in a federation with Ethiopia.

Harel continued, "I have chosen you because I believe that you and your family are the best ones able to live under an assumed identity. Although we have excellent relations with the government there, all operations must be done under full cover of secrecy."

Mike felt as if pummeled with blow after blow. Leave Paris for some hole in Africa? And not even Ethiopia, but Eritrea... And to mix in his family, who would live under an assumed identity! His first reaction was that it was an unreasonable request. Still, he tried to speak with restraint.

"Isser, this is a surprise. It's certainly a challenge. But I have to consult with my family."

"I have no other candidates," Isser said, not backing down. "I'm asking you to accept.



Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's bustling capital city.

But if you refuse, it will not harm your career. I'm asking you to go beyond the call of duty because I think you're right for the job and your family can handle it."

### The Switzerland of Africa

"No way," said Penina. "Exchange Paris for the ends of the Earth? Let's just go back to *Eretz Yisrael*."

Mike had done his research. Before he came home, he stopped into the library and read all about the area. He handed his wife a photocopy of an essay by the famed French microbiologist Louis Pasteur, who had traveled to Africa. In it, he had described Eritrea and Ethiopia as "the Switzerland of Africa."

Penina was not convinced, but Mike did not give up. He told her how important the mission was and said that they could try it out for two years. If it wasn't for them, they would leave.

Finally, Penina said, "This will definitely be a huge challenge... but I agree to try."

Mike agreed to go there alone for three months to make arrangements and find the best place for their family to live.

From his base in Asmara, Mike would be responsible for every operation and every intelligence recruit within a radius of hundreds of miles. Besides Ethiopia, his territory would include Sudan, Somalia,

the small French territory of Djibouti, and a short distance across the Bab al-Mandab Strait, Yemen and Aden.

Mike Harari crafted a new identity as Michel Belmont, a French businessman. He procured a nice home for his family and a car for his wife so she would not feel "trapped" at home, even when he was away on a mission. Several months later, the "Belmont family" settled into their new home together.

Mike immediately set to work, using his talents and resourcefulness to build a network of agents throughout the region. He traveled extensively and made connections in high places. Always charismatic, he developed a friendship with Lt. Gen. Abiye Abebe, Viceroy of Eritrea and the son-in-law of Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie. He also counted Abebe's chief of security, Col. Fitourari, as a close friend.

Israel did not have an embassy in Ethiopia. The two nations had very close relations, but they were secret. Because of their good relationship, top Ethiopian officials, including the emperor, were aware that Mike was working for Israeli intelligence.

On one occasion, Mike went on a safari with Col. Fitourari in the African Savannah. The trip would pass right by the Eritrean-Sudanese border. Mike was especially interested in scouting out that area for intelligence purposes.



Aerial view of Asmara from 1981.

