



Defiant Son of the KGB

Moshe Holender

How a Boy the
KGB Trained as a
Killer Found Torah

Zachariah Klein is an outgoing and friendly man who lives with his wife in the greater Monsey, New York area. He devotes much of his time to *chessed*. His children attend local *yeshivos*. Those who met him would never suspect the tumultuous life story lying just beneath the surface. Molded from a young age by harsh KGB trainers to be a loyal soldier of the Communist Party, Klein overcame the conditioning that was supposed to crush his moral sense and eventually had to fight for the right to reconnect to Jewish observance. Little did he know, the KGB has a very long memory.... His story sheds a rare light on a previously unknown, sealed chapter of late Soviet history.

Klein is eager to tell his harrowing life story so that others may learn from it and appreciate the opportunities they have. ZMAN was privileged to meet with him and hear his story from beginning to end, including many details that have never before been revealed. But for reasons of security for himself and his extended family, he asked ZMAN to omit certain details that would give away too much information about the events he was involved in, as well as to darken his face in photos and protect the names of certain family members.

Fleeing Iraq

In 1932, the year after the British Mandate over Iraq came to an end, violent Arab nationalists flooded the streets, terrorizing the Jews and minorities. The German ambassador, Dr. Fritz Grobba, began disseminating Arabic translations of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, and Radio Berlin, a Nazi propaganda organ, began broadcasting across the Middle East in the Arabic language.

Eli Kadouri, a resident of Erbil in the Kurdish region of Iraq, watched the terrible events unfold. Across the Arab world and throughout parts of Europe, Jews were no longer welcome. He took it upon himself to do something about it.

Kadouri left his homeland and began traveling to free countries, advocating for and aiding Jews to immigrate to *Eretz Yisrael* before they were overtaken by the flames of anti-Semitism. He traveled through parts of Asia and Europe, including the Netherlands and even Germany, helping Jews get to *Yerushalayim*... until he was stopped by the Red Army.

Kadouri, Zachariah Klein's great-grandfather, was conscripted into the army. After his service, he settled in one of the countries of the USSR-dominated Eastern Bloc, where he raised a family and where Zachariah was born. Zachariah asked that *Zman* not identify the specific country, except to note that it and its national agencies were firmly dominated by the USSR. Klein's native language is Russian.

Klein is of Sephardic heritage. He tells a humorous family legend to explain his Yiddish-sounding last name.

My mother's side, from Iraq, is Kadouri. My father's side is from Turkey. When his grandfather was being considered for army service, he was rejected because he was just one inch too short. People in the Ashkenazi community where he lived began calling him "Klein"—short—as a joke, and it stuck.

KGB in the Family

One thing in particular stands out about Klein's extended family. Parents, grandparents,



Zachariah Klein during the ZMAN interview.

aunts, uncles and cousins—they were all in the “family business”... the KGB. The KGB, a Russian acronym for the Committee for State Security, was the USSR's combination of a state police force, national security service and intelligence agency. Parallel agencies existed throughout the Soviet satellite countries of the Eastern Bloc, and their officers typically went to Russia for training.

A wide-ranging mandate spread the tentacles of the KGB octopus all over the globe. The agency is most famous in the West for its foreign espionage operations, but the KGB was just as active at home in counterintelligence and in crushing dissent by spying on and arresting its own citizens. It was considered a matter of national security to identify “ideological subversion”—anti-communist political and religious ideas and the dissidents who promoted them.

Klein's grandfather grew up in the Soviet system, joined the force, and met his wife, an agent as well, through the KGB. Years later, when the time came for their children to marry, they in turn found spouses within that small group of Jewish KGB agents. The result was a large extended family with dozens of KGB members.

Zachariah Klein's grandfather worked his way up the ranks. By the time Klein was born, his grandfather was the chief of police for the entire country, and worked closely with Soviet leadership. Klein recalls a story from his youth that impressed his grandfather's position on him:

When I was a young kid, I had kidney problems. Every few months I had to be hospitalized. For some reason I don't understand, the nurse there didn't like me. She stuck the needles into me as hard as she could—I saw the hatred in her eyes. Soon my legs started turning blue from the injections.

My grandfather was not happy with my treatment. He had lots of connections in the military hospital and knew he could get me admitted there. One day, he just walked into the hospital in full uniform, came to my bed, and took me out of it. The nurse came in and became hysterical, screaming, “Put that boy down!”

“This is my grandson, I'm taking him.” “I'm going to call the police!” she exclaimed.

“I am the police,” my grandfather replied. “Now move!” And with that, he pushed her aside and barged out the door carrying me. Nearby police officers came over to see what all the ruckus was about.

The nurse was screaming, “He's taking this child out of the hospital! It's a crime against the state!”

The policemen just looked at my grandfather, recognizing him of course, and simply said, “Ok, carry on.”

There was another time his grandfather wanted to intervene on Klein's behalf. Klein emphasizes that children had few rights, and adults did not tolerate misbehavior or disrespect. Corporal punishment administered by parents, teachers and even other adults was commonplace. On one occasion, though, matters went too far. He tells of an incident where one of his schoolmates told the teacher that he had taken one of his toys.



Eli Kadouri, originally from Iraqi Kurdistan, was drafted into the Red Army during World War II. He was Zachariah Klein's great-grandfather. Here: Portrait of Kadouri wearing the medals he was awarded during his time of service.



Klein's mother's mother's father.

“It wasn't true, but it didn't matter,” he says. “The teacher punched me in the ear and damaged one of my eardrums.”

Klein was temporarily deafened.

His grandfather was furious.

“He actually took out a gun and wanted to kill her,” Klein describes.