

In the Absence of Tricks

Ilan Mordoff

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Where no wise direction is, the people falleth

CONTENTON**OW**



*I dedicate this book to my dear late sister, Esther, who
passed away prematurely from a grave illness.*



I would like to extend my gratitude to attorney Yaakov Heruti and Gadi Nezer for their good advice, to Colonel (res.) Eliezer (Cheetah) Cohen for his patience and for teaching me a small but fascinating part of the world of aviation. And above all, I would like to thank my late sister Esther. During her short illness, she had time to read selected chapters before this book was published, and encouraged me from her deathbed, in her final moments; and to my parents, who supported me all along.

Table of Contents

1 Recruitment	9
2 The Office	47
3 Kamal's Story.....	58
4 The Pilgrimage	71
5 Solidarity.....	91
6 Testing the Waters.....	126
7 A Closed Forum Meeting.....	139
8 The House of Romanov	146
9 East-West Express to Moscow	158
10 A Meeting with the Head of the Mossad	212
11 The World of Computers	219
12 The War in Lebanon	226
13 Assassination in Berlin.....	272
14 The First Swallow.....	316
15 Preventing a Terrorist Attack Abroad.....	345
16 Skipping the Border	376
17 White String, Black String	388
18 The White Book	397
19 An Interview with Abu Nidal	403
20 On Humans and Cats	418
21 Retaliation	425
22 A Surprise Party.....	437
Epilogue.....	448

I

Recruitment

It all started by chance, on a wintry night in 1979, after leaving the apartment of a girlfriend from class. I had found comfort in that apartment, after a hard day's work in a clothing plant and a rather boring lesson in a computer-programming course.

It started raining as I walked along the dark street late at night. All was quiet. The sound of my shoes echoed in the street. I turned my head back, trying to estimate the distance I had covered and how far I had to go to the nearest bus stop, when I noticed a white Peugeot with its lights off rolling up behind me. I continued to walk – and the Peugeot followed. When I reached the main road, the car lights suddenly turned on and the driver's window rolled down. A man in his thirties with a handsome face leaned over and called out to me by name.

“Sorry, man, I don't know you,” I said to the stranger and walked on. The man swiftly pulled out a blue ID

card from his jacket pocket.¹ For a moment, I thought I'd come under some police investigation of which I knew nothing. Images from seven years ago appeared in my mind; I was a seventeen year old returning from a Purim party at four in the morning with two friends. Walking along one of Tel Aviv's main streets in hopes of getting a taxi home, we were suddenly caught by strong arms and thrown roughly into a white, American model car. Plainclothes police officers questioned us for two hours before letting us go. Later, it turned out we had passed by a building at the same time as an armed robbery was in progress – wrong place, wrong time.

I looked again at the blue identification card the agent was holding. It was a Security Agency employee ID card.

“Get in, please,” he said.

“What do you want?” I asked.

“It will be easier to talk inside.”

I got in, closing the door behind me. “Yes,” I said, “I'm all ears.”

The driver was quiet. He quickly maneuvered through the inner streets of Tel Aviv and five minutes later, we had arrived back at the place we met.

“I have been told to offer you a security related job,” said the driver without explaining.

“It has to be a pretty urgent job, considering the four hours you spent freezing in the car waiting for me.”

1 Israeli IDs are colored blue, as opposed to the orange ID issued to Palestinian inhabitants of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and the green ones issued nowadays by the Palestinian Authority.

He smiled wryly and said, “It is an urgent matter, and you’ve been found suitable for a certain position,” he answered.

“And what position is that?” I asked.

“We’re talking about a mission in the Mossad. We’ll put you through a series of tests and courses... you’ll go on the mission if we think you’re suitable,” the man said.

“I can’t give you an answer right away... I need to think about it.”

“I don’t want to force anything on you. Anyway, forget me and don’t tell anyone about this meeting.”

I nodded my head.

The car made its way to my house in Ramat Gan and stopped in front of my building where the man wrote something down on a piece of paper and gave it to me. “Once you make up your mind call this number and ask for Doron. Tell him nothing but your name and your answer, yes or no.”

“Goodnight... goodbye,” I said, getting out of the car and making my way to my parents’ apartment with measured steps.

Two days later, after having agreed to meet at Mossad Headquarters, a new chapter opened in my life. The first test took place in north Tel Aviv in a large two-story building. Ordinary-looking clerks sat around working in a large office with wood-paneled walls. I took a psycho-technical test, a personality test, and a series of memory tests. The tests went on for six hours and followed a tight

schedule, allowing for only one ten-minute bathroom break. Led to another room with a large square table in the middle, I sat for a series of memory tests.

“Look thoroughly at the objects on the table, and try to reconstruct each and every detail you see,” the examiner told me. My eyes studied the big table, cluttered with different colored pens, pins, scraps of paper, pencils, and various screwdrivers. Suddenly a white tablecloth flew over the table.

“What were the eight objects in the lower left corner?” asked the examiner.

I answered him and then, one after the other, twelve men without any remarkable facial features entered the room, as if on cue.

“Sort the people according to their order of entry,” the examiner said.

At the end of the test, an examiner took me to a dark room, where I watched a movie. After fifteen minutes, the movie stopped and the lights went on. The examiner gave me a piece of paper and asked me to describe, in two lines, the second to last scene in the movie. “Only the second to last scene,” he emphasized.

A week later, an appointment was set up for me at The Bureau, the high-rise in central Tel Aviv – the Institute for Intelligence and Special Operations. Taken through a long, narrow corridor, and after a maze of turns, I arrived in a small room and waited. After several minutes, a man in his fifties came into the room and introduced

himself as Nahum. He started by saying that I had done well on the tests and thanked me for agreeing to join the intelligence community as an agent.

Nahum began his service during the War of Independence in the Hagana's Intelligence Service. Considered a genius in the art of spying, eventually he was appointed Director of Special Operations. In our first meeting, I was told that my status was as a reserve agent. The Mossad does not pay these agents but rather "compensates" them for loss of salary. The intensive course would take about three months, and start after working hours. The course included memory exercises, self-defense, weapons training, ciphering, tracking methods, and field exercises.

At the end of the first briefing, a tall, blue-eyed man with thick graying hair came into the room. Nahum introduced him as Salman, a person who had trained many of the Mossad operatives. I spent the next few days doing memory exercises with Salman. He showed me different pictures, aerial photographs, certificates, documents, and maps I needed to memorize, after which, he would ask me to compile them into a story. For example, I looked at a colored picture of a young, black haired man with brown eyes and a long angular face. Afterward, I was shown three different documents one after the other. One was an Israeli ID card with the name of David Peleg, ID number 5390800. The picture on the card was identical to the one previously shown. The second document was

of an employee of IBM Israel. The document was in the name of David Peleg. The photograph on the document was identical to the colored photo. The third document was an Israeli passport, number 972532 in the name of David Peleg. The photograph was the same as the rest of the photographs. I memorized all the document numbers.

The next documents presented to me were aerial photographs of the IBM building and the Shalom Meir Tower in Tel Aviv, a passport application form, and a registered letter stamp, then two more documents. One was a timetable for the train from Frankfurt to Hanover. Departure from Frankfurt was 14:23 and arrival to Hanover, 17:43. The other document was an El Al plane ticket in the name of David Peleg, itinerary Tel Aviv – Frankfurt – Tel Aviv. The date of the flight was March 2, 1979. Last, I was presented with an entrance ticket to a computer expo to open on March 3 1979 and a sketch of the expo area with a description of how to reach the IBM booth. I had to remember the number of turns to the specified booth on the sketch. All the documents were given to me for one minute and then Salman took them away.

The story I compiled was as follows: David Peleg, a young man with a long face, brown eyes and black hair, worked for IBM Israel. David went to the Ministry of the Interior at the Shalom Meir Tower in Tel Aviv to apply for a passport for his upcoming visit to Hanover, Germany for a computer expo. He presented his ID card,

number 5390800, and filled in a passport application. After several days, he received a registered letter with his passport number 972532, issued in his name – David Peleg. IBM purchased the El Al plane ticket from Tel Aviv to Frankfurt and back to Tel Aviv. On March 2 1979, David Peleg traveled to Frankfurt on an El Al flight. He continued to Hanover by train, leaving Frankfurt at 14:23 and arriving in Hanover at 17:43. The next day, March 3 1979, the computer expo opened in Hanover. David Peleg arrived at the main entrance, where he got the map of the expo to help him find the IBM booth. He had to walk down an avenue, take a right on the fourth turn and turn left immediately after that, to the row of booths connected to IBM's big pavilion.

In other memory exercises, I was required to memorize various complex numbers. Salman used to say that a man's brain is all an agent has in situations when he can't write things down or take photographs.

I spent two entire days training with various weapons in a defense facility close to Caesarea on my Fridays off. These exercises failed to excite me, especially when it was obvious that most of the targets were impossible to blow apart.

Another quite fascinating subject I was taught was cryptography – the writing and study of secret codes. The lessons reminded me of my childhood when we would make up a secret code at school, to be used in class, and to hide the mischief we were planning from the teacher.

In the first lesson, I learned an old code called “Nabel.” This code uses five letters, ADFGX, written both vertically and horizontally. When twenty-five squares are randomly filled with the letters of the alphabet, every letter exchanges with a pair of letters and ultimately all pairs are encrypted with numbers by means of an index. Other encryption methods used loose-leaf folders where words were broken down into letters and numbers according to permanent keys. This course emphasized hiding and destroying codes.

The surveillance course was the last one I had to take in Mossad. Surveillance plays out like an orchestra. The piece moves with complete coordination among the musicians, with no room for any of them to doubt their playing. In the end, it is the conductor’s crescendo, and our conductor was Salman.

“You have to look like a nobody, like a average, dull person – someone who doesn’t make heads turn.” Salman explained in the first lesson. Throughout the course, I studied various surveillance techniques such as surveillance on foot, by a car, alone and in a squad – including carrying out observation missions, and operational photography. Salman would repeatedly recite a basic rule on surveillance – “When things go wrong and you want to stay alive, start moving. Just move and don’t get stuck in one place.”

On one of the Fridays, Salman gave me a reconnaissance plan where I had to change buses and taxis at specific transit stops according to a precise schedule. I was told that

unidentifiable Mossad agents would oversee me along the way. I was also told that a certain person would be waiting for me holding a newspaper at the final location and that would be the end of this reconnaissance assignment.

I spent three hours traveling and changing modes of transportation with perfect timing. When I arrived at the final meeting place, I waited for the man with the newspaper to show up. The place was empty. I started wandering the narrow streets connected to the meeting place, just so as not to be stuck in one place. After four hours, Salman appeared behind me and tapped me on the shoulder. He later told me that the exercise was meant to test my ability to withstand stressful conditions.

One day I was summoned to Salman's room at the Bureau. This man had been my instructor for three months and had captivated me with his honesty and agreeable manner.

"The course is over," he said to me in his quiet voice. "I have given Nahum my report on you and you'll receive it later. You're aware that you were sent on several false missions; for example, you spent four hours waiting for a meeting that got delayed. You're likely to run into similar situations in reality, and our work is the total opposite of the way it is portrayed in spy books. Our routine is quite boring and involves a lot of frustration in waiting."

Salman kept talking, saying he didn't know what my first mission would be, but he had some advice for me that could come in useful in certain situations. For

example, I must always follow orders, and when they are not clear enough, I must ask for clarifications and only then will I know what I am supposed to. I am part of a team within an organization, but during an operation, I am a lone individual, and must reconcile myself to the frustrating situation in which I'll never know the other moves on the chessboard. I must always mind my own business and take no interest in what the other agents around me are doing. The director of the department has the complete picture, and he's the one moving the chess pieces on the board.

“Another issue I wanted to talk about,” said Salman, “is a delicate matter – women.” Salman, sitting up straight in his chair, moved to a slightly more relaxed position, cleared his throat and said, smiling bashfully, “I am not saying that you should become a monk, but don't overdo it. Any excessive socializing with women makes you conspicuous in your surroundings and might expose you to unnecessary danger.”

According to Nahum, I had two additional tests left, and those were out in the field. The first test came on a Saturday night when Nahum and I made our way to Ben Gurion Airport. A young man waiting for us at the terminal entrance led us straight to the VIP lounge after helping us bypass the security checks and passport control. The lounge, which served as a pit stop for Israeli and foreign dignitaries, was empty and dark on that particular night. Nahum turned on the lights.

“Signor Gilermino, you have a few minutes to get familiar with your life,” said Nahum and chucked a few documents and an Italian passport on the table. “You’ll be joining the passengers returning to Israel from Copenhagen on El Al flight 378, which should be landing at 21:30.”

Half an hour later, I was standing next to the El Al plane ramp among the passengers, most of whom were young Danes about to travel to various Israeli Kibbutzim. After the shuttle dropped us at the terminal, we spread out toward the several passport control booths. I took my place in the middle of the line, holding the travel bag given to me earlier by Nahum. It was my turn. I handed my Italian passport to the border guard. He leaned forward over his desk, probably looking for me in the Israeli Police and Shin-Bet² wanted lists. He lifted his head, quickly looking at my face, then at the passport again and then back at me with a penetrating gaze, as if he was asking what an Italian was doing among Danish passengers arriving from Copenhagen.

“How long are you going to be in Israel?” he asked in English, examining my shabby clothing.

“A week,” I replied.

“Do you have any means of support, cash?”

“Yes,” I replied without batting an eye, “I’ll be spending the entire week on Kibbutz Beit Hashita in the Jezreel Valley.” That was the first kibbutz that came to mind

2 *Shin Bet* – Israeli General Security Agency

because I happened to know a few members there from my military service.

“Is this your first visit to Israel?” he asked.

“No, I visit Israel every year, I even learned some Hebrew at an *Ulpan*.³”

The Officer smiled at me, and put an entry stamp in my passport.

“Have a nice stay.”

I walked quickly toward the exit, through the “nothing to declare” lane at customs and Nahum, who was waiting for me outside, came up and shook my hand warmly, like a man meeting a childhood friend.

For the second test, we went to an air force base in the Tel Aviv metropolitan area. Nahum gave me a map of the base and my mission was to infiltrate the military facility without being detected, obtain a file from a certain place, and slip out of the base with it. On Saturday night, a week after my test at Ben Gurion Airport, Nahum and I arrived at the military base.

“I must warn you,” he said as he stopped the car, “this is a dangerous test. Shin-Beit informed the base commander that terrorists might attempt to penetrate his base, and so the base has been on high alert. There are three possibilities. The first is that you return with the file, the second is that you get caught, and the third possibility is that you get shot.”

I left Nahum and walked toward the base where a

3 *Ulpan* – intensive Hebrew language school