

On The Run

Thirty four representatives of Israeli intelligence, military and diplomatic core got stuck in Iran when Khomeini took over. This is the story of their escape.

On January 1, 1979, Erwin Muller, a former Gestapo officer and member of the Spider network that smuggled top Nazis out of Germany after World War II, sat beside the gates of two magnificent cages, now open and empty, and wept. Brig. Gen. Yitzhak Segev, the Israeli military attaché in Tehran, stood next to him and tried to find words to console him. “In the hallucinatory situation that we were all in, with the mobs flooding the streets with holy fury, this was a particularly hallucinatory comic interlude,” Segev recalls. Khomeini’s mobs were taking control in Iran. The royal family was on the run—and not all of their royal pets could survive.

Four years earlier, the director of Israel’s National Parks Authority, Gen. Avraham Yaffeh, had had the idea of recreating herds of the animals that had roamed the country in biblical times, among them the wild ass. Such animals, he discovered, could be found in Iran. At around the same time, the brother of the shah, prince Abdul Reza, a pampered member of the royal family, came on a visit to Israel. His major occupation was hunting. The walls of his palaces were full of stuffed trophies. He told his hosts that he had heard that in the Negev desert there was an ibex with a one-and-a-half meter horn span, three centimeters more than the world record. Yaffeh seized the opportunity and made a deal—Israel would allow him to hunt an ibex in exchange for a pair of fallow deer.

The minister of agriculture issued a special hunting license. The ibex was located and steered to an appropriate site, where the prince was allowed to fire a fatal

bullet. The royal taxidermist who had accompanied Abdul Reza immediately injected embalming substances into the carcass to ensure its preservation. The grateful prince promptly issued a permit for the export of a pair of fallow deer from Iran. For budgetary reasons, the Israeli Parks Authority left the matter in abeyance until the last minute. On November 28, 1978, as the rioting in Iran approached a crescendo and the government's grip weakened, the Parks Authority sent a crew to Tehran. With vehicles and security provided by Segev, they traveled to a nature preserve on the shore of the Caspian Sea, picked up two pairs of fallow deer (the royal family had generously broadened the original permit for one pair), and returned to Tehran, where they hoped to lodge them in the local zoo until a flight to Israel could be arranged. But the director of the zoo, former Gestapo man Erwin Muller, flatly refused. As Segev recalls, "we applied some pressure on the embassy security officer and we put the beasts into a corral that we fenced off in the embassy yard."

Then another problem cropped up. It turned out that in order to fly the animals out, a special permit was required, and that Muller was the only person competent to issue it. "We asked him, and to our surprise he agreed," says Segev. "And we soon understood the reason for his generosity. He would grant the permit only if we agreed that the royal tiger and lion be included in the shipment. The shah kept the animals in cages in his palace grounds, under Muller's care, but as the riots spread they were moved to the zoo. Muller was frightened that like the other symbols of the monarchy, they would fall victim to the angry mobs and he wanted them shipped to Holland. I had no choice, and I agreed."

After another round of heavy pressure, this time applied to El Al airlines managers in Teheran, and a flood of phone calls from Israel, space was allocated on the next flight out for the four fallow deer and the lion and tiger, at the expense of

some Jewish passengers and the cargo of carpets they wanted to ship out. On January 1, 1979, Segev arrived at the zoo in a convoy of vehicles, to pick up the two big cats. He found Muller there, crying. “It turned out we were a couple of hours too late. Thousands of demonstrators had broken into the zoo and slaughtered both of the big cats. Muller was distraught with grief.”

Segev sped off to the airport. The fallow deer were loaded onto the plane and flown to Israel. They were eventually turned loose in a nature preserve near Haifa, on Mount Carmel. Ten years later, a forest fire swept through the area, destroying much of the preserve’s flora and fauna, yet the wild fallow deer and their numerous offspring bunched together in a small clearing (around a modest monument that had been erected by Carmella and Yitzhak Segev, in memory of their son Sharon who fell in the line of duty in the IDF’s Armored Corps). They survived the blaze, and today there are 650 fallow deer in Israel, all of them descendants of the two couples brought from Iran.

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The differing fates of the cats and asses mirrored the two possibilities facing many foreigners in Iran at the time of the revolution. As the turmoil swelled and the United States maintained its pressure on Tehran not to violate human rights, the Iranian top brass played with the idea of carrying out a military coup, but couldn’t decide how and where to begin. As Segev recalls, “All of the senior officers were waiting for the visit of the deputy commander in chief of American Forces in Europe, Gen. Robert E. Huyser, who came on January 8, 1979, a week before the shah’s departure. They wanted to hear from him only one thing – that if they took over the government, the United States would prevent a Russian invasion of Iran. That is all.

They could have handled everything else by themselves, 800,000 troops, 800 generals.”

The United States, however, wanted to keep the regime the way it was. The administration believed that a coup attempt would be the worst move the army could make. Huyser came to Tehran in order to *thwart* any attempt at a putsch by the generals. All he would say was that President Carter had sent him to ensure a democratic Iran. He succeeded in sewing discord among the generals and causing enough disputes and confusion to frustrate plans for a coup, and the minute he left Tehran, ties between some of the generals and the revolting mullahs tightened. The chief of staff, Gen. Abbas Gharabaghi, and many senior SAVAK officials, saw which way the wind was blowing and took steps to ensure their futures by going over to the revolutionaries.

On January 16 the shah, ailing and debilitated, decided that without American backing, he had best pack up and leave. He took a box with a few clods of Iranian soil, and with his wife Farah Diba and a handful of aides, flew to Egypt, where he was welcomed as a head of state by his friend, President Anwar Sadat. There were many Iranians who sincerely believed that the shah would return once again, like in 1953, to Iran with still greater power, backed by the CIA and British intelligence. Some generals, who still regarded him as their commander in chief, tried to contact him in Egypt, but they were told that his imperial majesty, the king of kings, was on a private visit and that all matters should be referred in his absence to the council of regents. Air Force commander General Amir Hossein Rabiei was determined to shoot down any aircraft carrying Khomeini to Iran, but insisted that the shah approve this idea before he issued orders. Since he never managed to speak personally to the monarch, he had to cancel the plan.

Though many generals did not know what to do, Khomeini had few doubts. He intentionally cultivated the image of a strong man. One of the first orders he gave to his personal representative in Tehran, Ayatollah Mutahhari, shortly before his arrival, was that only approved photographs of himself should be printed and displayed in public. He especially opposed the distribution of two photographs which had been plastered all over the city – one of him wearing spectacles, which he feared could be construed as a sign of weakness, and the other showing him smiling kindly. Islamic tradition states clearly that the prophet Muhammad never smiled and that he dismissed those who smiled as superficial and morally dubious. Within days, all of the objectionable portraits had been taken down and replaced with new ones, in which the imam's thick eyebrows were highlighted, suggesting angry determination.

On February 1, Khomeini loyalists took over Tehran's Mehrabad international airport. The ayatollah landed there in a chartered Air France jumbo jet and was greeted by triumphant rejoicing such as Iran had never before witnessed.

Avraham Geffen (a pseudonym, as the Mossad banned publication of his real name in this book), an Iranian Jew who was to play many clandestine roles in the long war with Iran, was working at that time in the El Al office in Tehran. He was one of the local Jews who provided logistical help to the Israeli embassy and the offices of the Jewish Agency (a body that organizes immigration to Israel). He would soon try to help secure the escape of Israeli government personnel.

“On the day that Khomeini arrived,” he recalls, “I was called urgently to the airport, whose administrators were still functioning, more or less, and from their point of view I was the El Al representative. They brought welding tools and broke into the safe in the El Al office at the airport. The company owed them money, and they were

honest. They took in cash what was coming to them, and they gave me the rest to transfer to Israel via banks abroad.

“When Khomeini’s plane arrived, everyone went out to welcome the ayatollah. I was standing 20 meters away from him, and hundreds of guards were separating him from the excited crowds. All of Iran’s streets were strewn with flowers on that day. When the plane landed, state TV played the anthem of the shah’s regime. The reaction was not long in coming, and the Revolutionary Guards occupied the network building.”

Brig. Gen Segev recalls the confusion among the old guard. “A week before Khomeini arrived, I met Generals Rabiei and [Army aviation chief Manouchehr] Khosrodad. I asked them if they were intending to do anything. Raviei asked me, ‘Segev, do you think we’re going to sit and do nothing? Khomeini is going to land here. We’ll take him with his entourage from the airport to Kish island and kill them all.’ On the strength of that meeting, I advised [foreign minister Moshe] Dayan to leave the embassy’s senior staff where they were. We evacuated 1,500 Israelis, but I hoped that things would work out in the end and I wanted to keep a foothold intact. I was afraid that if we abandoned the embassy entirely, we wouldn’t be able to come back.”

When Khomeini returned, Segev, like Geffen, stood amid the welcoming crowds. “We saw the mass of humanity flooding the airport,” Segev recalls, “and then I saw my friend, General Rabiei arriving in his personal helicopter, in order to fly Khomeini away himself. He thought that that’s how he would get himself immunity.” Needless to say, it wasn’t to the island of Kish that the commander of the Imperial Air Force piloted the revolutionary leader.

Khomeini turned down a proposed series of visits to the universities that had been hotbeds of the revolution so as not to share the glory with the partners in his triumph, and headed instead for the Tehran cemetery, where he made a fiery speech. “Islam has been moribund for almost 1,400 years; we have returned it to life with the blood of our youth Very soon we will liberate Jerusalem and pray there.” As for the government of Shahpour Bakhtiar, who had been appointed prime minister by the shah before he left, Khomeini dismissed it with one short sharp statement: “I will break their teeth.”

On February 11, that government crumpled; Bakhtiar admitted he had lost control and fled the country disguised as an Air France steward. His government was replaced by one headed by Mehdi Bazargan, a Khomeini supporter whom the imam decided to make use of in the interim period after the revolution. Khomeini did not want to be too closely associated with the purges to come.

There were 34 Israelis stranded in Tehran when the revolution broke out, including office and security personnel of the embassy, Mossad and military, the Jewish Agency, and El Al. They hid out in three apartments. Avraham Geffen and another Iranian Jew carried messages between the apartments and brought food and drink. They also brought the ambassador, Yosef Harmelin, and his staff fresh news from the corridors of power, which they acquired through old connections and substantial bribes. Amazingly, the international telephone exchange was still working and they were in contact with Israel.

The embassy itself had hardly been functioning since the shah left. Only the security officer and a few other workers were there, and Iranian army tanks stood outside. Other remaining staffers were in hiding. Most of the embassy's secret documents had been flown to Israel in November, preventing a preview of what was

to happen at the American embassy 10 months later. On the morning of February 10, one Israeli, hiding in an apartment with several others, Zadok Ofir, began making a traditional Jewish *chulent* stew for lunch. While it was cooking Harmelin and Segev decided to go and see what was happening at the embassy. They were stunned to see that the tanks had gone. Segev returned to the apartment and put a call through to chief of staff Gharabaghi who had already made his secret deal with Khomeini and was one of the few top officers to survive the purges that started soon afterward). He told Segev that the army had decided to adopt a neutral position and therefore all forces had been ordered to return to their bases. The conclusion was that the embassy was now at the mercy of the revolutionaries. Rumors reached Segev that a mob was marching on the airport, and he made a call and ordered the one remaining El Al jumbo jet to take off immediately.

Three hours later Avraham Geffen joined one of the demonstrations, carrying a picture of Khomeini and chanting slogans against the shah. “Suddenly I saw someone go onto the platform and begin to incite the thousands of people there against America and Israel, ranting about all the things that should be done to them. The bottom line of his speech was a call to march to the Israeli embassy not far from there. The huge crowd, perhaps ten thousand people, cheered in agreement. I dashed to my car and I told the local El Al branch chief to step on the gas. We made for the embassy, but got stuck in a traffic jam on the way. It looked as if all of Tehran had taken to the streets. I got out of the car and ran like a rocket, faster than I ever thought I could, toward the embassy.

“The Iranian guard unit wasn’t there anymore and the Israeli security guard let me in. Inside I found a few guards and embassy staffers going about their business as if nothing was happening. I started screaming at them, trying to understand what

exactly they were doing there while the mob was approaching. At first, they never quite believed that such a thing could be happening in Tehran. They didn't want to leave the embassy, which was very dear to them. I yelled that they were crazy and if they didn't run away quickly the mob would come and kill them all. In the end I persuaded them and they immediately set fire to some boxes of secret material that they had prepared for destruction. Everyone piled into a few cars and left through the back gate of the embassy. A few minutes later, the mob arrived. They couldn't break down the gate so they climbed over the fence. Very soon they had conquered the embassy."

Segev also wanted to get back to the embassy, but couldn't get through the mob. He watched the proceedings from a distance. "There were a quarter of a million people there, I estimated, protesting in front of the embassy, and pushing against the fences."

Gefen recalls what happened next: "I went back a few hours later, like an interested onlooker. I speak and look like a native and no one suspected me. I arrived just in time for a speech by Yasser Arafat from a balcony before a tumultuous, inflamed crowd in the embassy courtyard. He asked the Revolutionary Guards to hang the PLO flag over the embassy, where the Israeli flag had been, and he said the building would now be the Palestinian embassy. The Iranians agreed of course."

The crowd looted everything that could be moved. Some of them got hold of a gigantic Persian carpet which had once graced the floor of the ambassador of Nazi Germany in Tehran. After World War II, the Jews of Tehran had purchased the carpet and in the 1960s donated it to the Israeli embassy.

For the staffers in 1979, the escape from the embassy was only the start of their drama. From the embassy Segev drove to the General Staff HQ to protest against the embassy takeover. When he got there, he found that it too had been taken over. He called Gen. Rabiei on the phone and asked for a plane to fly the remaining Israelis out, but was told the airport was already under the control of Ayatollah Mohammad Beheshti, someone to be avoided at all costs. Gen. Khosrodad told Segev that he would be able to get him out, but as for the rest, he could only say he was really sorry.

Segev remembers it vividly. “We went back home. We were hiding in my apartment, which was known to be the residence of the military attaché. I ordered an immediate evacuation. But Zadok said ‘come on Itzik (the diminutive of Yitzhak), I’ve spent hours on this *chulent*.’ I thought about it for a while and I decided, fuck them. We’ll eat this stew whether Khomeini likes it or not. We sat down to eat, and put a sentry by the window. In the middle of the meal, the sentry reported that a Revolutionary Guards jeep had pulled up outside and armed men had entered the building. We drew our pistols and waited for them next to the door. We were tense. We decided to kill them off, something like Samson when he said ‘Let me die with the Philistines.’ We looked through the peephole and saw them coming up the stairs, passing by our door, and going up the stairs to the third floor. It turned out that they had come to pick up a senior revolutionary commander, who had been a top army officer and defected. He was a good friend and had even taken part in meetings in my apartment. To his credit, although he knew who lived under him, he never turned us in.

“The revolutionaries departed with my neighbor, and we went back to the *chulent*. Two minutes later, there was a knock on the door. The landlord had arrived with a huge basket full of towels. He was sure that they’d killed us and he’d come to

clean up. Instead of corpses, he found us chomping our stew, and he stood there frozen in shock."

Years later, in June 2007, at a historical forum near Tel Aviv assembled as part of the research for this book, old enemies met, as new friends, to reconstruct the events of January, 1979. Among them were Segev and Hani al-Hassan, the PLO's first ambassador to Iran, who had directed the revolution's intelligence efforts and commanded the imam's bodyguards during the days immediately following Khomeini's return.

Al Hassan recalled with a grin: "We knew that Gen. Segev was in Tehran and running for his life. We did everything to try and trap him. We wanted to swap him for Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails." Segev responded, in turn, that "Hani al Hassan was at that time one of the targets on the hit list of Israeli intelligence."

Today the two once-bitter enemies have founded the "Sons of Abraham" association, dedicated to peace. Al Hassan says he regrets that the PLO was one of the few allies that Khomeini had in the Arab world before the revolution. It trained the core of the Revolutionary Guards at its bases in Lebanon and assisted with funds, guidance, and equipment. When Khomeini flew into Iran, he summoned Arafat and requested as much help as he could provide in the formation of the new regime.

Arafat flew into Tehran on February 5, with al- Hassan and a large crew of the PLO's best-trained commandos, Force 17, Arafat's personal bodyguards, whom he turned over to protect Khomeini. Al Hassan explains that among the documents that had been neither removed nor burned at the embassy was a list of the names of all the Mossad agents in Iraq. Arafat ordered that the document be delivered immediately to Saddam Hussein. Among his other duties, al Hassan was the PLO's liaison with the Iraqi ruler, who was very fond of him. Despite Arafat's explicit order, however, al-

Hassan evaded handing over the list. “I didn’t know if it was genuine, or just a Mossad attempt to spread disinformation. I knew one thing – Saddam never took chances with things like this. The minute he got the list he would have all the people on it rounded up, tortured, and eventually murdered. I didn’t want to have it on my conscience.”

Meanwhile, life in Iran became more dangerous for many people, not just the remaining Israelis. Khomeini’s people began hunting down members of the opposition. At first, violence was used only against the shah’s senior personnel. Khomeini ordered the execution of several senior officers in order to nip in the bud any remnant notions of a coup by the old imperial army. Mock trials were arranged. Among the first victims were General Nasiri, for years the commander of the mighty SAVAK, and General Khosordad. The task of presiding over a show trial was offered to a number of mullahs, but they politely rejected the historical opportunity. In the end, the imam instructed Ayatollah Khalkhali to do the job. Khalkhali acted with dispatch, turning a classroom into a courtroom, where he sentenced five generals to death. The generals were taken to the roof of the school building and blindfolded. In photographs of the event, signs of torture are clearly visible on their bodies. Next, many other leaders of the military and the defense establishment were executed. Some of them were “killed” three times – by shooting, hanging, and drowning. Others were shown more respect: They were seated on carpets from their native districts and shot in the head.

“Altogether, I formed strong and friendly ties with 60 senior members of the regime in Iran,” says Segev. “To my great regret, in the days after Khomeini’s return I was forced to see 50 of them killed, on television or with my own eyes. My name was explicitly mentioned in some of the verdicts. One of them was the man from the

airport administration who had helped me get approval for the takeoff of the El Al jumbo jet. I don't regret our relations with Iran, they were a strategic asset, but to have all of these things on my conscience was very hard in those days."

Ultimately the 12 Israelis in Segev's apartment on February 10 decided to leave. The group began wandering from one Jewish home to another, and in each home the frightened residents hinted gently that their presence was not wanted.

Once, to obtain vegetables, Segev went to the market. He didn't know that buyers were expected to bargain with vendors, because his wife had done all the family's marketing, so he attracted attention. A local commander armed with a Kalashnikov AK-47 began asking questions. "I took him aside, and told him I was from the PLO and represented it in Iran. All of a sudden it turned out that he spoke Arabic, and knew quite a lot about the PLO. Luckily, a few weeks earlier, Military Intelligence had sent out a background review, so I could show him that I knew what I was talking about. His eyes lit up and he took me back to the stall and told them enthusiastically that I represented the only body that supported the revolution and ordered them to give me everything free. Years later, I told this story to Arafat, and he said dryly, 'You bastard. I see that your Palestinian identity saved your life.'"

"One Morning," says Geffen, "I woke up before everyone else in our hiding place in an apartment in Eisenhower Street. I looked out of the window and I saw that the game was up. The building was surrounded by heavily armed soldiers and jeeps mounted with heavy machineguns. We were sure they were there for us. After a brief parley, I went downstairs, like an inquisitive resident of the building, and started speaking to one of the soldiers, standing at the ready next to a machinegun. 'What's going on,' I asked. 'Who are you looking for?' It turned out that the Revolutionary

Guards intelligence suspected that there was a CIA agent living in the building. But they had already broken into the apartment and found it empty and they were soon leaving. I agreed with him, at the top of my voice, that all of the American and Israeli agents must be wiped out, and the sooner the better. I was so relieved that they hadn't come for us that I launched into a long speech of praise for Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini. Later I even put together some light refreshments for the soldiers.”

Eventually, it was arranged in a meeting between Minister of Defense Weizman and CIA representatives in Tel Aviv for the Israelis to fly out with a group of Americans in two Pan Am planes that were due to land in Tehran in mid-February. At the airport there was a six-hour wait, as tensions were high. Finally, after hours on the plane and repeated passport checks, one Pan Am plane took off. The Israelis, who had gone through so much in the previous weeks, asked the pilot not to report that there were Israelis on board until they were clear of Iranian airspace because they feared they could still be forced to land. It was only when they landed in Frankfurt and saw the El Al plane that would take them to Israel that they knew they were free.