

**Rafi Eitan**, who died on March 23, was the Israeli Mossad agent who captured Adolf Eichmann in one of the most daring espionage operations ever conducted. But he was also the handler who closed the door on Jonathan Pollard, the American Navy analyst who spied for Israel, when Pollard needed him most. Did his years as a spymaster erode his humanity?



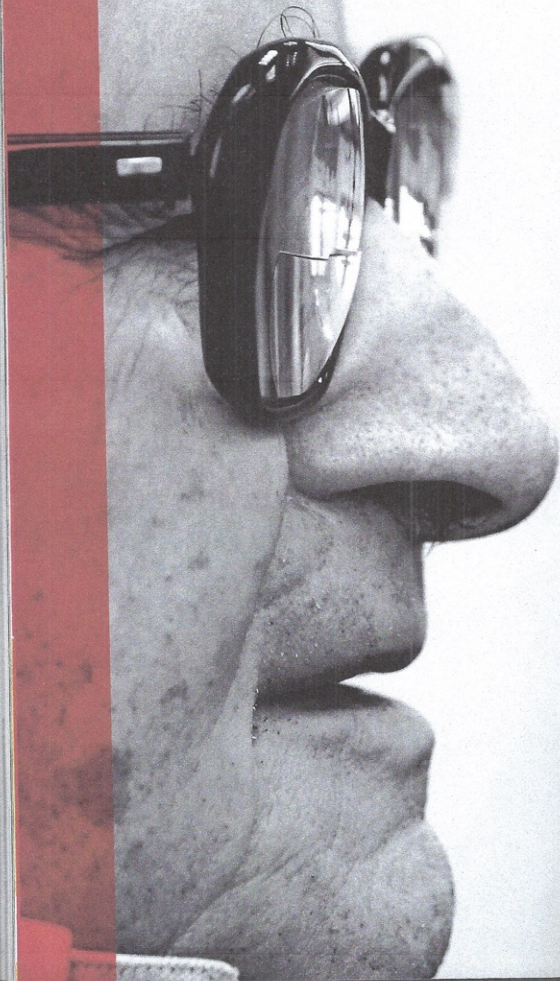
A black and white profile photograph of an elderly man with thick, wavy grey hair. He is looking towards the right. The image is partially obscured by a white rectangular box containing the word "no" and a large red title "REGRETS".

no

**REGRETS**

BY **Omri Nahmias**

PHOTOS *Flash90*



## RAFI EITAN,

a fighter, spymaster, and politician, passed away last month at the age of 92. He was a man of dueling identities: With his thick glasses and soft features, he resembled an

endearing grandpa, but behind the jovial veil was a hardened spy and seasoned fighter who juggled people's lives in an almost cavalier way.

Even among the ranks of the intelligence community, Eitan stood out for his loose mouth and his arrogant talk of past operations. Though he at one point served in the Knesset, Eitan possessed none of the typical politician's charisma or diplomatic rhetoric. Years of espionage had turned the little boy from Ein Harod into a tough cynic who viewed his job as a zero-sum game.

Against the backdrop of history, Rafi Eitan will always be known for his two most famous operations — one a source of pride, the other a source of infamy. If he leaves any legacy, it's a murky one replete with question marks. In the final analysis, the same man who won acclaim for masterminding the daring capture of Adolf Eichmann was also the callous handler who couldn't — or wouldn't — open the door to save

Jonathan Pollard when the Jewish spy needed him most.

**Stinky Rafi** Rafi Eitan was born in Ein Harod, a kibbutz in northern Israel, to Yehudit and Noach, *chalutzim* who came from Russia on the Third Aliyah. His childhood was, by all accounts, peaceful and idyllic.

"My mother gave birth to six children. One died of pneumonia and the second of malaria, and then there was me, so I actually grew up as an oldest," Eitan recalled in an interview with *Calcalist* in 2016. "When I was three, my parents moved to the city of Shalom, today Ramat Hasharon. They planted an orchard, a vegetable garden, fruit trees, and started a beehive and a dairy farm. I helped with the milking. They were loving, easygoing parents, and I don't remember raised voices."

**RAFI AND HIS FRIENDS** were pranksters who loved playing practical jokes. But unlike most kids, he felt fully comfortable adding a certain dimension of danger and horror to his activities

At first, Rafi went to school in Ramat Hasharon and later in Givat HaShloshah, where he shared a room with future general and Knesset member Rechavam Ze'evi. "I was the one who gave him the nickname Gandhi, because he was so thin. We remained friends until his final day," Eitan said, referring to Ze'evi's murder by assassins. (Rafi himself would be nicknamed Rafi Hamasriach, Stinky Rafi, after he navigated through sewers for a special operation later in his career).

When Eitan was ten years old, he watched a German spy film with his mother. "Spying is a great profession," he told her, to which she replied, "Spying is a dangerous profession." But the idea took root in his head, and he held onto a certain conviction that one day he would be a great spy.

Rafi and his friends, like many kids that age, were pranksters who loved playing practical jokes. But unlike most kids, he felt fully comfortable adding a certain dimension of danger and horror to his activities. He used to hide in the dark streets at night and lie in wait to terrify passersby with "tongues of fire" — a prank whereby Rafi would fill his mouth with kerosene, light a match, and then spray the flame like a blowtorch.

When he finished his studies, his father asked him to work on the family farm,

but Rafi made it clear that he had different ideas about his future. "I told him no, that I was dedicating my life to Israel's security," he told *Calcalist*.

"I enlisted in the Palmach. If I wouldn't have shattered my leg in a battle in Malkiyah, I probably would have become an officer in a combat unit, but because of my injury, I became an intelligence officer. That's how my career began."

**'No Problem'** The first time Rafi Eitan killed a person, he was just 19. It was in Emek Yizrael and he was serving in the Palmach, the elite fighting force of the Haganah, the pre-state militia. His



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commander sent him to assassinate a pair of Christian pilgrims, members of a group deemed a threat to the formation of the state.

"To this day, I don't know why they chose me for this mission," he told the *Uvda* program on Channel 12 in 2014. "I remember their faces to this day. We said in Arabic that we wanted their money and then immediately shot them; they didn't have a second to feel any fear." Years later, Eitan said he never felt any guilt for the killing.

Eitan repeated often that he didn't believe in regret. "There's no value in saying you regret something. It's not a useful word. The minute you do it, there's nothing to regret. You can just analyze the situation so that you don't do it again. Are you looking for regret? Look somewhere else. I'm not your address."

In 1951, Eitan was recruited by Isser Harel to join the Mossad. Eitan described his "recruiting process" to Yossi Melman, *Maariv's* veteran intelligence correspondent, who interviewed Eitan numerous times over the decades. "We had a very brief conversation," he told Melman. "Isser pointed at a third-floor balcony in a building opposite the cafe where we were sitting and said, 'I want to see you there.'"

"No problem," Eitan replied. He left the table, took a look at the building, and climbed up the drainpipe. Within minutes, he was on the balcony, waving gaily to Isser Harel down in the café. When he returned to their table, he was officially accepted into the Mossad. (Melman adds a postscript to the tale: Eitan told him this story at age 85, and when he finished describing his climb, he offered to demonstrate it on the spot. "I can still do it," he said.)

In an interview with *Mishpacha*, Melman emphasizes that today, intelligence operatives are selected for their mental and psychological qualities rather than their physical ones. In addition, he says, technological indices are used to initially vet candidates, and human judgment is brought in only once computers have selected the first round



The Eichmann capture was Rafi Eitan's moment of glory. The master spy even escorted the Nazi murderer (middle) to the gallows, although he found him to be "a mediocre person with a weak personality who got where he did without a guilty conscience." In his spare time (bottom) Eitan fancied himself a sculptor

of potential recruits.

"The second difference," he says, "is that today the Mossad is much bigger. Then, it was an operations unit. Today, the Mossad has manpower — it has multiple specialized units. Back when Rafi Eitan was working there, he did it all. He was involved in recruiting agents and in stealing documents. He was also the head of the operations unit and maintained ties with Arab nations such as Morocco. Today, there isn't one single person who does all of that. It's much more professional, more disciplined, and more bureaucratic."

Melman says that Eitan's personality suited the creative, improvise-as-you-go ethos of the Mossad at the time. But the world has changed a lot since then. "There were no cameras at airports then; it was easy to forge passports, there were no credit cards. It was much easier to get around the world without being caught, and it was much easier to maintain a cover story."

**Operation Finale** While intelligence operatives generally spend their lives in the shadows, Eitan was that rare spy who captured global attention. His ticket to the headlines was one of the most daring operations in the history of espionage. The order came directly from the prime minister, David Ben Gurion: Locate Nazi arch-criminal Adolf Eichmann in Argentina, abduct him, and bring him back alive to stand trial in Israel.

Operation Finale was the name chosen for the mission to abduct Eichmann, the Nazi who facilitated and managed the deportation of Jews to ghettos and death camps. And Rafi Eitan was the agent chosen to lead the operation.

The operation was several years in the making. As early as 1957, the Mossad began receiving information about Eichmann's approximate whereabouts. But only toward 1959 did the information become more concrete. By February of 1960, the Mossad had enough information to confirm that Eichmann had changed his

# MENGELE TOO?

In September 2017, documents were released revealing that the Mossad had been very close to catching Josef Mengele, the infamous doctor who conducted medical experiments on Jewish inmates at Auschwitz-Birkenau, as they were zeroing in on Eichmann.

But according to Eitan, then Prime Minister David Gurion scared Mengele into hiding by announcing Eichmann's capture. "Mengele also lived in Buenos Aires, and we discovered his apartment," Eitan told Kan Reshet Bet in September 2017.

Eitan explained that his team did not want to attempt to capture both Nazi criminals at the same time. "We had a successful operation in hand, and if you would do another one, you risk them both."

Instead, he said that he reached a compromise with the Mossad's Isser Harel that while the Israeli team traveled to Israel with Eichmann, Eitan would prepare a plan to capture Mengele. "We remained there to capture Mengele," he told Kan Reshet Bet. "He wasn't home. The neighbors said he'd be back in a week. During that time, the media around the world broadcast that Eichmann had been captured, and Mengele never returned to that apartment."

But Eitan didn't give up on his prey. "In 1962," he said, "we again identified Mengele on a farm in Sao Paolo. But then the Mossad head resigned. In short, if Ben-Gurion would not have publicized Eichmann's capture, we could have caught Mengele as well."

Brash bragadocio? True testimony? Considering Eitan's checked reputation, it's hard to know for sure.

name to Ricardo Clement and was living in an isolated house on Garibaldi Street, about 30 kilometers from Buenos Aires, the Argentinian capital.

By March 19, Shin Bet agent Zvi Aharoni, who spoke German and had been sent to Argentina to find Eichmann, possessed a photo of Clement and determined with a high level of certainty that the man was Eichmann.

At this point, the Mossad entered the picture and accelerated the process. The challenge was twofold: to successfully apprehend Clement and to do so completely under the radar of the Argentinian authorities.

An additional challenge was how to smuggle Eichmann from Argentina to Israel. There was no direct air route between the two countries at the time. Then a creative solution was found: In May 1960, Argentina began celebrations of its 150th anniversary, and a number of countries dispatched diplomatic delegations to the event. Secret discussions between El Al, the Mossad, and the Foreign Ministry sealed a decision to send a special plane with a diplomatic delegation to the ceremony. That same plane could be used to spirit Eichmann back to Israel under the nose of the Argentinians. This gave Eitan a neat solution to his problem — but also a tight timetable for capturing Eichmann.

**Strange Fascination** On May 11, two cars set out to ambush Eichmann as he was walking home from the bus after work. The team took up their positions at 7:40 p.m. At 8:05, Eichmann appeared. Rafi Eitan, together with Zvi Aharoni, Tzvi Malchin and Moshe Tavor, jumped him, stuffing him into their car. The capture was over within a minute.

"It was one of the simplest operations I ever carried out," Eitan told *Uvda*, displaying his bravado. "You hit the right shoulder, pull the left shoulder toward you, and clamp the head. Then you drag him. We put him into the backseat with his head on my knees."



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In the documentary film, *Memories of the Eichmann Trial*, produced by David Perlow and released in 1979, Eitan recalls the time he spent with the Nazi criminal. "The moments I remember as most intense during this operation were those moments that the man was in the car. I covered him with a blanket, and I felt him trembling and his heart pounding. And the feeling that this man was in my hands is something I will never forget. We told him in German not to utter a word because his life would be in danger. Then he said that all his life he was afraid of this moment, when he would be captured by the Israelis. He thought we would kill him right away."

The team took the former Nazi to a secret hideout apartment and stripped him of his clothes to confirm he wasn't carrying cyanide capsules. From that point on, Eichmann was under constant

**"THE FRIGHTENING THING IS** that every person with a mediocre-plus ability to execute commands could reach the situation and perform the actions that this man did"

surveillance, lest he attempt to commit suicide before standing trial in Israel.

"Zvi Aharoni asked him what his name was and he said it was Otto Henninger," Eitan related. "We asked him again, what is your name, and he said Ricardo Clement. We asked him what his SS number was and he said the exact number [of Adolf Eichmann]. Then we asked him, what is your name, and he said Adolf Eichmann. Right after that, he asked, 'Can I have a glass of red wine?'"

Eitan was at first fascinated by the Nazi butcher and visited the apartment where he was being held several times. It was not, he later explained, because he wanted to hurl accusations at Eichmann, nor because he wanted to gloat. He came to talk. Eitan wanted a better sense of the Nazi's character and intellect. To put it bluntly,

he wanted to know which of the two was the superior.

Back in Israel, Eitan continued to visit Eichmann in prison. "My personal curiosity was tremendous," he told the documentary film makers. "I wanted to understand a few things. I wanted to know who he was. I'll tell you something that might not be pleasant for the Israelis to hear, but ultimately, he was also an officer with tremendous personal discipline to execute orders. I was also at the time an officer who received orders to carry out and I was curious: Who is this person? What are his mental abilities? I was so curious to see from close up not only the officer who killed so many Jews, but also what it meant to be a Nazi officer."

Ultimately, Eitan was disappointed to find that Eichmann did not possess an especially incisive mind; he was neither

intellectual nor charismatic. "The figure I saw was rather pitiful. There are millions of people like him in the world as far as his ability and personality. And the frightening thing

is that every person with a mediocre-plus ability to execute commands, and with an elevated degree of loyalty, could reach the situation and perform the actions that this man did. That is perhaps the scary thing. He was a mediocre person with a weak personality and he could get to where he did without a guilty conscience."

In May 1960, after Eichmann had been found guilty and condemned to death, Eitan escorted him to the gallows. Before he died, the Nazi murderer Eichmann had a message for Eitan: "I hope that you will all follow me."

**Only in the Movies** In the 1960s, after the most successful operation of his life, Eitan was appointed the commander of the Mossad's European bureau. He was based in Paris and handled dozens



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of agents. He secretly recruited Arabs from all over Europe, persuading them to betray their homelands at great risk to their lives.

"He was terribly cynical," Melman tells *Mishpacha*. "He always had a smile, and you couldn't tell if he was serious or not. He understood that relations between nations were based on common interests. He was a realist, perhaps even Machiavellian."

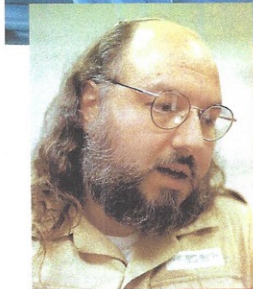
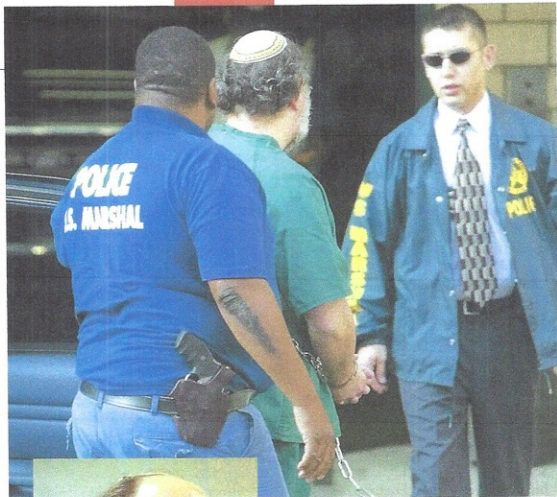
Eitan wasn't the type to be consumed by worry or second thoughts; he used his free time to sculpt, fancying himself an artist. As appearances go, Eitan was an unlikely spy. He was small, a bit awkward, and wore thick glasses. And he wore hearing aids, the result of an operation in the early days of the state.

"We have this stereotypical image of a spy being tall and handsome," Melman says wryly, "but that's only in the movies." For Eitan, his unlikely appearance worked in his favor, however, as he used it to avoid suspicion and gain trust. That trust is what brought Jonathan Pollard, a civilian intelligence analyst in the US Navy, to Rafi Eitan.

In the 1980s, Eitan headed the Bureau of Scientific Relations ("Lekem"), one of Israel's most secret units. Established in 1957, Lekem was responsible for collecting scientific and technical intelligence abroad, both from open sources and by means of covert operations. According to Melman, Lekem specialized in stealing technological know-how that Israel needed to build advanced weapons. And it did so by stealing secrets from its allies in the United States, Western Europe, and South Africa.

By that time, the US Navy had hired Pollard (in September 1979) as an intelligence research specialist at its Operational Intelligence office in Suitland, Maryland. He won promotions five times during his six-year stint.

The last promotion, in June 1984, brought him to the Navy's Anti-Terrorist Alert Center. He held clearances for access to confidential, secret, top secret, and sensitive classified information. Pollard



Eitan said he felt "responsible, but not guilty" over ordering Jonathan Pollard thrown out of the Israeli embassy where he fled for asylum. "I made a practical decision based on the interests of the State of Israel"

asked for and obtained an introduction through an associate to Colonel Aviem "Avi" Sella, his initial Israeli "handler," who was then a senior Israel Air Force intelligence officer studying at New York University.

**Getting the Goods** Pollard was apparently motivated by the fact that he was privy to classified information that he knew would be of use to Israel and that he felt the US was withholding from its Middle Eastern ally.

Thus began a risky, covert operation, whereby Jonathan Pollard transferred classified documents to his Israeli handlers over a period of a year and a half.

Eitan handled the operation for Lekem, primarily because the Mossad did not want to participate in a spying operation against an ally. Mossad leaders understood that if the agent was exposed, it would severely damage relations with the United States.

By the summer of 1984, after Pollard



**EITAN ADMITTED** that he was the one who gave the instructions to the embassy to kick Pollard out. "I don't regret it. I made a practical decision"



had met with Sella, he began gathering documents he had, and others he requested special access to, and delivered them in a briefcase to be photocopied by the Israelis. He would do this right before the weekend and made sure to have them back by Monday morning.

The plot thickened in November of that year. Pollard and his ex-wife Anne traveled to Paris to meet with Sella and two other Israeli intelligence operatives, Rafi Eitan and Yossi Yagur. The meetings lasted several days, included discussions of operational plans, compensation, and tasking Pollard to obtain more specific classified information.

The precise nature of what Pollard handed over to Israel is still classified, but the CIA damage assessment conducted on the Pollard case notes that Israel sought intelligence on Arab and Pakistani nuclear development plans; Arab exotic weaponry, including chemical weapons; Soviet aircraft, air defenses, air-to-air missiles, and air-to-surface missiles.

In November 1985, someone working for the US Navy reported that she had seen Pollard remove documents from the office

and put them in his briefcase. From that point on, Pollard was under surveillance. Pollard was called in for questioning by his bosses, but he thought the Israelis would rescue him if the noose ever tightened.

On November 18, 1985, FBI agents stopped Pollard in the parking lot of his office building. While being interviewed by federal agents, Pollard called his wife, Anne, twice, using their code word "cactus" to let her know he was in trouble.

Pollard also tried to notify two other Israeli intelligence operatives, Yossi Yagur and Irit Erb, a former employee of the Israeli Embassy in Washington.

Yagur told Pollard to stall for time, while in the meantime, both he and Erb fled the country, leaving Pollard holding the bag.

As a last resort, on November 21, 1985, the Pollards sought asylum at Israel's embassy in Washington. After initially letting them in for 20 minutes, the Israeli Embassy kicked them out, into the hands of FBI agents, who arrested them.

Initially, Israel feigned surprise over what it termed a rogue operation, offered its full cooperation with the US, and promised to return any stolen documents.

Within a few months, Washington began losing patience with what it viewed as another Israeli "stall for time." Fearing a rift in relations with the US, Israel finally owned up to their responsibility, and admitted Pollard had been spying for them.

In previous interviews, Eitan explained what had happened and admitted that he was the one who gave the instructions to the embassy to kick Pollard out.

"I received a message on my red emergency phone that Pollard was at the embassy seeking refuge, and that the FBI was waiting for him outside," Eitan told *Uvda*.

"Throw him out," I told them. I don't regret it. I made a practical decision based on the interests of the State of Israel. Someone in a job like mine who does differently is making a mistake." Eitan knew that if the embassy granted Pollard refuge, it would be effectively admitting that Israel was behind the spying.

Immediately after he relayed those instructions, Eitan spoke to the prime minister and defense minister, telling them that Pollard would be arrested and that it would cause a huge scandal. "Right

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away, I suggested that they sacrifice me, and I said I would take all responsibility. I gave the order, and I was the one who authorized myself to do it."

"For me personally, the Pollard story was a failure. My most famous failure," Eitan would say in a moment of candor in the *Uvda* interview in 2014. "He said that he was willing to work for the State of Israel, to risk himself, and he had information that could have helped us a lot. I was impressed by him as a man with the highest level of human intelligence. It was clear to me that he was very capable and that we had to use him for a short time, not more."

Pollard, under terms of a plea-bargain arrangement, eventually pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to deliver national defense information to a foreign government, but the US government reneged and sentencing Judge Aubrey Robinson sentenced Pollard to life in

**"IF SOMEONE THINKS that it's possible to work in intelligence without mistakes – that's his first mistake"**

prison without parole. Pollard served 28 years in a federal penitentiary before his release in 2015.

Under the terms of his release, Pollard is under virtual house arrest. He lives in a tiny Manhattan apartment, under a strict curfew, and is prohibited from travel

outside the borough, much less to achieve his lifelong dream to make aliyah.

The Pollard affair also had repercussions for Eitan. The man who once dreamed of leading the Mossad was blamed for the biggest blunder in Israeli spying history.

In an interview with *Maariv* in 2015, Eitan told the newspaper that he feels "responsible, but not guilty," for what happened to Pollard.

"I cannot turn back the clock on what happened," Eitan said. "You can't make a war without mistakes. If someone thinks that it's possible to work in intelligence without mistakes – that's his first mistake."

### Which Eitan to Remember?

Eitan had a second career, in politics, that happened totally by happenstance when he was 80 years old. In 2006, activists decided to form a political party, Gil, that would advocate for senior citizens. Party

leaders offered Eitan the place at the top of the list, and, to everyone's surprise, including Rafi Eitan himself, the party

won seven seats in the Knesset.

But the party soon devolved into bitter squabbling among members. "Everyone wanted to be better than the next one," Eitan told *Maariv*. "I realized it in the first minutes after getting to the Knesset. As soon as offices were assigned to our MKs,

they began to bicker over the room with the sink or without the sink and quickly emerged as self-interested individuals, each one worrying only about himself."

Rafi Eitan, who died at the age of 92, left a dual legacy. For so many Holocaust survivors, he was the daredevil who brought them a degree of closure and revenge. For the sophisticated spy network that is Israel's pride too, he helped set a bar of courage and risk that has endured long since the day he shimmed up a drainpipe to win his first appointment.

On the other hand, he will be remembered as the spy handler who sold out his agent – Jonathan Pollard.

Rafi Eitan would want to be remembered as the man who embodied the dual roles that are at the core of the state of Israel: the daring country that takes huge chances in war and peace, and the cold-blooded statecraft that seeks to preserve Israel's interests at any cost.

Amid this conflicted legacy, the bigger questions will always remain. What does it do to a person to live in a shadowy world of secret operations and assassinations? How does one's psyche change after years of sending people on risky assignments that can mean imprisonment or worse? And most importantly, can a man whose snap decisions spell life or death for agents around the world maintain his humanity – or will he inevitably be compromised and compromise others? ●

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