

# UNDERCOVER RABBI

*Who is the secret rabbi who for the last three decades has been clandestinely teaching Torah and Judaism to Iranian Jews, helping young Iranian Jews escape the military draft, assisting Mossad intelligence for whereabouts of Israeli MIAs, and serving as a conduit for Iranian refugees sheltered in Europe? He has widespread connections with Israeli, Arab, American, and European security forces, yet secrecy is his primary tool. Rabbi Michoel Pressburger of Vienna finally lifts a 30-year-long curtain of silence*

In transit: Iranian refugees in Vienna

## Eliyahu Sheinfeld, Vienna

A compelling chapter in Yaakov Nimrodi's autobiographical *Masa Chayai (Journey of My Life)* deals extensively with the fate of missing Israeli POWs dating back to the War of Independence. Nimrodi, chairman of the Israeli daily *Maariv* and a former military attaché in Iran who rubbed shoulders with the Mossad for many years, was allegedly involved in arms dealing and in efforts to topple the Iranian government. Privy to backstage information, he tells of extensive hunts, dashed hopes, and contacts with chief officers and mobsters — all in efforts to release any of the MIAs.

In one of the book's most intriguing chapters, Nimrodi hints at a mysterious European chassidic rabbi who has helped the Mossad over the years in its quest for information on these missing Jews.

**Collaborators** Nimrodi writes as follows: "Of all our efforts and meetings in search of the missing soldiers, the most intriguing are associated with a certain rabbi, a Rosh Yeshivah somewhere in Europe." Sounds far-fetched, but it's all true.

"In early 1990, [Yona] Baumel [father of MIA Zechariah Baumel] received a strange phone call from one of the European capitals. The caller introduced himself as a chareidi rabbi involved in rescuing Iranian

Jews, mainly children and teenage boys. As part of his extensive contacts, he was privy to verified sources, who claimed knowledge of Zechariah Baumel's whereabouts.

"In May 1990, I flew to Europe to meet this rabbi. As soon as we settled into the hotel we set off for the shul. A small sign at the entrance guided us down a short flight of stairs to the rabbi's 'Talmud Torah.'

"Both my partner and I were stunned. Just a moment ago we had been in the center of a magnificent city, and we now found ourselves in impoverished Iranian territory. Tens of children sat and learned Torah. Many were without families, having just recently arrived from Iran via a secret underground network. Suddenly, the rabbi

appeared out of the darkness and offered his hand in greeting. His charismatic and impressive stature was in stark contrast to the dilapidated state of the Talmud Torah.

"The rabbi put his main efforts into the great mitzvah of smuggling children out of Iran. He risked his life time and again when flying to Tehran on a foreign passport and hiding his *peyos* under a large hat. Had he been caught, he would never have been allowed to leave Iran; he'd be lucky to be left alive. Yet despite all the dangers, he carried out his clandestine efforts. He established a collaborator network and paid them off well to smuggle these children over the Turkish border into Europe. After a short stay in Europe, during which he supported

them, clothed them, and taught them Torah and English, the children were sent to New York. He single-handedly funded most of this network, although he did tell us that the children's parents paid a small sum.

"We soon found out that aside from children, the rabbi smuggled out forty-seven adults, including four who had already been sentenced to death. I was amazed at his strength of character. After a short round of greetings, we sat down to discuss the matters for which we came. It was immediately apparent that the rabbi was well-informed, with reliable sources and contacts. He certainly didn't look like an intelligence officer, but was well versed in all relevant information on the missing soldiers and on

the battle at Sultan Yakoub. He mentioned Ron Arad, and said he can definitely be located. He cited Arabic names, several of which I had already heard of, and expressed hope of meeting Palestinian leaders, close acquaintances of George Habash and other known terrorists. He was closely connected with two popular religious leaders in Iran, as well as a powerful minister in an Arab country who was well connected to the PLO.

"Days passed, with no sign of good news. I made contact with an IDF general, unofficially informing him of the agreement signed in Europe. I requested that the CIA verify the rabbi's part of this deal. The matter was secretly checked, and



after a short while, the general informed me, 'Yaakov, your rabbi in Europe is working. It's true.' He didn't say more, but it was clear that from the time we signed on the agreement, the rabbi kept up close connections with the Arab minister and other Iranian and Arabic leaders.

"However, despite his valiant efforts, the rabbi was unable to obtain a video with a sign of life from any of the missing soldiers. Rechavia Vardi and Yehudah Albocher, who were in close contact with him, informed me that he related it was impossible to obtain this cassette due to internal Iranian quarrels. Several newspaper clippings of that time reported that terrorists were currently forming lists of Israeli-held prisoners, in anticipation of swapping POWs. I am convinced this was no coincidence; this was directly connected to the rabbi in Iran.

"Although he was unsuccessful in this mission, I remained in contact and did not lose my faith in him. He reasoned, logically, that the Gulf War and Iraq's invasion of Kuwait made it impossible to further these fragile plans. I maintained contact with the

speaks fluent Arabic and Farsi; and he married for the first time several years ago, while already in his late fifties — his personal life is off-limits to the public, and the little that has been culled about his international missions is just a hint to a much larger picture that might have to wait until Mashiach's arrival to be revealed.

Rabbi Pressburger was born in Vienna, son of HaGaon Rabbi Shmuel Pressburger, Rav of Kehillas Bonihad and the famous historic "Schiff Shul" in Vienna. Rabbi Shmuel's home was open to Iranian refugees, and his son, Rabbi Michoel, continues the legacy today.

Rabbi Pressburger's unusual ability to form relationships with an entire spectrum of people, in addition to his personal charisma, served him well in establishing contact with people of influence throughout Europe and the Arab world, including the most radical elements of the Iranian regime.

"Secrecy is his most proficient tool," quotes a good friend of Rabbi Pressburger. "Because his secrets are so well guarded, he has been able to form unusual



Rabbi Pressburger with bar mitzvah boys: fleeing the draft

rabbi, as he continued to smuggle hundred of Jews out of Iran, risking his life again and again. Rechavia Vardi and I were definitely of the opinion that he had strong contacts in the militant Arab world and could be of great benefit to us."

**The Rabbi's Secrets** Today, nearly twenty years after that mysterious meeting, this European rabbi continues his heroic, sometimes life-endangering efforts in Iran. The Talmud Torah mentioned in the book is still active. Although unsuccessful in obtaining information on the Israeli MIAs, he has tallied amazing success in rescuing Iranian Jews. For the first time, this rabbi has agreed to reveal his name to the press, in an exclusive interview with **Mishpacha**. He is Rabbi Michoel Pressburger of Vienna.

Most of Rabbi Pressburger's life is still shrouded in secrecy, and nearly everything related to the Iranian rescue operations, including his contacts in the Arab world, are under wraps despite intense public curiosity. Except for scant details of his private life — he

relationships and diplomatic contacts with high-ranking members of the American, European, and Iranian governments."

And, although the bottom line on his resume is his constant travel between Iran and the West and his close contacts within the Iranian government, this hasn't hampered his equally close relationships with many Israeli officials.

Although Rabbi Pressburger agreed to be interviewed in his home in Vienna, most of the questions about his life and his work were left unanswered. He permitted but a tiny peek at his work throughout the years.

**Which Iran Is It?** Iranian Jewry has had many ups and down over the years; the most prosperous time in modern history was after the establishment of the State of Israel. The westernized Shah offered the Jews the option of joining the masses who had already made aliyah, or of staying in Iran under his protection, where life was safe and lucrative. In fact, life was so financially stable that some of the Iranian Jews who made aliyah were disappointed with the quality of life in Israel, and returned to Iran.

All this changed once the Islamic



Safe haven: four people smuggled across the border were sentenced to death



Rabbi Michoel Pressburger: most of his life remains a mystery

"The trouble begins when Islamic law infiltrates private lives at home, making Jewish education nearly impossible. Islamic motifs are part and parcel of the school system."

Rabbi Pressburger describes how Jewish children are forced to learn the Koran and desecrate Shabbos. Many find themselves victims of abuse and scorn. "It is forbidden to open any type of private school; any attempt to do so would lead to certain arrest. Children are forced to spend many hours each day in the hostile atmosphere of Muslim schools. Hatred of Jews and the Western world are part of the required curriculum," he says

Rabbi Pressburger relates the story of the thirteen Jews arrested and tortured after being indicted for Israeli espionage several years ago. Prior to their arrest, they were involved in teaching Judaism. Still, there are some heroes who are willing to take the risk.

"Recently," Rabbi Pressburger says, "An Iranian born *avreich* returned to Iran,

revolution took place in 1979 under Ayatollah Khoemeini. The new radical Islamic regime constricted their lives, forcing them to conform to Islamic law and often pressuring them to take on the Islamic religion as well.

Rabbi Michoel Pressburger relates to the situation today: "In many Jewish areas, mainly Shiraz and Isfahan, the situation is so bad it brings to mind the [Anusim] of Mishad 100 years ago, who were forced to denounce their religion and live secret lives until well into the twentieth century.

"It is important to note that nearly 100 percent of Iranian Jews are loyal to their Jewish heritage and consider themselves religious. Intermarriage, if at all, is rare, and is usually forced."

Not all Islamic rules pose difficulties. Veils, so despised in modern culture, are accepted by the Jewish women. According to Rabbi Pressburger, many continue this custom even after leaving Iran, and can be seen walking the streets of Vienna draped in veils. Likewise, the law prohibiting alcohol in public is not a life-threatening legislation.

When an Iranian refugee arrives in Vienna, his Iranian passport is cancelled and he receives a temporary visa. During his stay, he may not leave Austria, is not authorized to work or find permanent residence, and must conclude all necessary arrangements for his American passport



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Celebrating in freedom: a network of border smuggling

after living quite some time in Vienna and America. He became a *talmid chacham*, and chose to return and teach Torah in Iran despite the risk." Still, it is no surprise that most of Jews still remaining in Iran wish to leave their homeland, in which they are citizens merely on paper.

**Diligent, Honest and Smart** "For the past twenty years, there has been a steady surreptitious emigration," Rabbi Pressburger

explains. "This is an amazing and rare operation, comparable perhaps to the mass Russian emigration, albeit on a smaller scale. The most remarkable aspect is that it has been going on for so many years."

Iran has not experienced a one-time, mass emigration in the style of North Africa or Yemen. In Iran, Jews are still staying afloat.

"Today there are approximately 20,000 Jews living in Iran, half of whom live in

Tehran; the remainder in Shiraz, Isfahan, or other outlying towns. It is interesting to note that circumstances for the Jews vary greatly in each township. Tehran is a rather modern city, hub of industry, business and embassies. Jews are fairly tolerated there, as opposed to Shiraz, which is notorious for religious fanaticism.

"Actually, internal immigration from Shiraz to Tehran would be quite beneficial for the Jews, but it is nearly unheard of for the same reason that there is no mass emigration either. You see, any Jew who wishes to leave Iran must first relinquish all his assets. But no buyers are available; Jews abstain from any new business ventures, and Muslims hold out and wait for the price to hit bottom. The same applies for any move within Iran as well.

"Throughout the years, Iranian Jews have become well established, financially and socially. They are honest, diligent, and quick. It is no wonder that many years pass before they can bring themselves to make the painstaking decision of leaving behind life-long accomplishment."

Yet even after the decision is made, the question remains: Where to now? Iranian authorities are surprisingly flexible in granting permission to leave, but then, the question is where to go. With most countries, the immigration gates are locked. Israel is, of course, out of the question. And most attempts to fool

the authorities by making a stopover in another country are doomed to failure.

**International Pact** Help for Iranian Jews came in the form of an incredible American foreign policy, whereby America agreed to issue passports to Iranian refugees on condition that they make a lengthy stopover in a European country, as a proof that they are indeed sincere about alternate citizenship.

"When an Iranian refugee arrives in Vienna, his Iranian passport is cancelled and he receives a temporary visa. During his stay, he may not leave Austria, is not authorized to work or find permanent residence, and must conclude all necessary arrangements for his American passport. If he does not succeed in doing so, he is sent back to Iran, with very little chance of leaving again," says Rabbi Pressburger.

Why was Vienna chosen as the primary stopover? Austria has the longest-standing American Embassy, and due to this and various historic and political considerations, Austria was in fact the only country willing to grant temporary residence to Iranian expatriates until their new status was established.

Because of his close connections with the American ambassador in Austria and various high-ranking Austrian government officials, he is able to ease the situation for the displaced refugees.

And for the past thirty years, Rabbi Pressburger has utilized his close connections with the American ambassador and various high-ranking Austrian government officials to extend visas, clarify status issues, and expedite matters.

"Until they are allowed to emigrate, refugees live on support which I obtain for them, or take on temporary jobs, such as babysitting or housekeeping for members of the *kehillah*."

These two restrictions — temporary residence and difficulty making a living — combined with Austria's sole interest to serve as a temporary stopover en route to America, also explain why a permanent Iranian *kehillah* was never established in Vienna.

**EU Sanctions** One of the major problems facing Iranian Jews is the military draft. Males over age seventeen are required by law to join the military, and are released after age twenty-two. This draft has severe ramifications: a soldier has no possibility of keeping Jewish laws and traditions while in service, and Jewish soldiers are privy to humiliation and scorn.

Based on testimonies of Iranian Jews, Rabbi Pressburger relates that Jewish soldiers are deliberately sent to the most dangerous fronts and often used as "cannon fodder." Only religious Muslims are permitted to join the elite ranks of the Guardians of the Revolution.

Because boys of draft age are at greatest risk, parents do anything within their power to smuggle them out of the country, starting the process even at the tender ages of twelve and thirteen. It can sometimes take years before temporary European visas are issued, and after that there is the wait for American immigration papers to come through.

Most often the boys arrive in Vienna alone, leaving their parents behind to settle financial matters. In cases where parents are either unaware or have resigned themselves to the great dangers involved, Rabbi Pressburger might resort to his valuable connections to spirit the young man out of the country. Rabbi Pressburger is also called upon to intercede when Iranian authorities forbid a Jew to emigrate due to tax issues or court hearings. And, as Nimrodi recounts in his book, Rabbi Pressburger managed to smuggle out four Jews who were sentenced to death. At least for now, the particulars of that, and so many other operations of intrigue, will remain a secret.

Rabbi Pressburger has also been involved in some difficult cases of *agunos*, working together with the Israeli Rabbinate. The women are wives of men who have disappeared or have been imprisoned without a trace for many years, their families having no idea about their whereabouts or

even if they are alive. Some of these women have emigrated to Europe.

Today, Rabbi Pressburger's vast connections throughout Europe are more important than ever. With the formation of the European Union, individual countries, including Austria, have signed on treaties that tie their economic and political futures more closely to each other. And because it is now permitted to move freely from one European country to another without presenting a passport, Austria is no longer independent with regard to immigration and transit laws, but must adhere to the rules of the entire EU.

"Since the establishment of the European Union, the immigration bureaucracy for Iranian refugees has doubled. Any request must pass the commissioner of the EU, which makes the waiting period much longer," Rabbi Pressburger explains.

### Final Destination — America

Anyone visiting Vienna will find dozens of Iranian Jews in the city at any given time. They remain in Vienna for months, sometimes up to two years, during which they adapt to the life of an immigrant.

Rabbi Pressburger's involvement in the lives of the Iranian refugees is not only technical. After their initial absorption in Vienna, he helps them integrate into the *kehillah*, which is of utmost importance in Iran. Rabbi Pressburger, who is fluent in Farsi, Arabic, and other languages, has established a vibrant *kehillah* for the refugees, including schools and housing. But due to the constant changeover of the community, Rabbi Pressburger remains the *kehillah's* sole permanent member.

Most of the refugees go on to live either in New York or California. New York is home to numerous small Iranian *kehillos*, in Queens, Long Island, and Brooklyn. The Los Angeles *kehillah*, which attracts Jews from Shiraz and Isfahan, is the largest in the US.

For young Iranian refugees, the stopover in Vienna is most significant. Having left their hometowns at a young age to flee the draft, these boys are for the first time exposed to an advanced level of Jewish education. Rabbi Pressburger takes special pride in his students who go on to study in American yeshivos such as Ner Israel, Chaim Berlin, Lakewood's Beth Medrash Gevoha, and others.

When these young people are asked why they have decided to run from Iran, each has his own pack of experiences, but one thread connects them all — life was difficult, physically and spiritually, and they are grateful for a chance on the outside. And orchestrating it all is Rabbi Pressburger, most of whose activities we'll never know. And what we do know is just a tiny fraction of what we don't see. ■



Filling in the education gap: some remain up to two years

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