

Remembering the Israeli Victims of the 1972 'Munich Massacre'

A few years ago, I traveled from Israel to the U.S. with a layover in Munich. I had never been to Germany.

Germany, and its history as concerns Jews, is not only not of interest to me, but, as an Orthodox Jew, the idea of being there makes me uncomfortable. Nevertheless, the best itinerary was through Munich. I rationalized that I wasn't leaving the airport.

After landing, I made my way toward the connecting flight's gate. I was surprised that, although I hadn't left the airport, there was additional security for passengers on connecting flights. I understand now that this is not uncommon, that no airport that serves as a hub for connecting international flights can necessarily rely on the originating airport's security.

However, I was arriving from Israel, the airport and country with arguably the most sophisticated level of security in the world. Bother me with scanning my carry-on? Take away items that were fine to fly with in Tel Aviv? How annoying and unsophisticated. It felt that rather than being effective in catching terrorists, it was just a systematic delay to keep me from getting to my connecting flight.

I kept thinking, *If they had this level of security and cared enough in 1972, people would only know Munich as an airport hub, not as the site of one of the world's most egregious and horrific terror attacks.*

To me, Munich is and always will be defined by the Palestinian Arab hostage-taking, terror attack, botched rescue and murder

of 11 Israeli athletes 48 years ago this week at the Munich Olympics. For a country known for its precision, Germany's lack of preparedness was particularly egregious. It is unimaginable how a country that, three decades before, had made genocide systematic, was unable—or unwilling—to protect the athletes.

Background

The 1972 Olympics were used to rehabilitate Germany's image as a kinder and gentler Germany. Security was largely unobtrusive, undercover and unarmed, mostly prepared to deal with unrest in the form of ticket scalpers and public disorder. The head of the Israeli delegation, Shmuel Lalkin, expressed concern about the Israeli team's accommodations on the ground floor of a small building close to a gate, making them particularly vulnerable. German authorities supposedly promised extra security.

The terrorists' carefully planned attack began in the early morning of Sept. 5. As the athletes slept, eight Palestinian Arab terrorists wearing track suits scaled a two-meter fence to sneak into the Olympic Village, carrying duffel bags loaded with assault rifles, pistols and grenades.

After murdering 2 of the 11 Israeli athletes immediately, they took the nine additional members of the Israeli Olympic team hostage, with demands of safe passage out of Germany and that Israel release 234 Palestinian Arab prisoners in Israel jails, as well as the German-held founders of the Red Army Faction, Andreas Baader and Ulrike Meinhof.

Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir appealed to other countries to "save our citizens and condemn the unspeakable criminal acts committed," also noting, "if we should give in, no Israeli anywhere in the world shall feel that his life is safe ... it's blackmail of the worst kind."

Munich is a long, bungled and murky story. Allegations of poor

planning, refusing Israel's assistance, incompetence in the rescue and even having advanced knowledge which they covered up, all plague Germany today. Adding to perception of incompetence was a sense of German indifference that the hostages/victims were Jews. This perception increased by the immediate release of the bodies of the dead terrorists, and of the survivors two months later—to a heroes' welcome in Libya.

The World Watching

In Munich, the games and athletes carried on as normal, oblivious to or indifferent about the attack taking place nearby. The games continued until pressure on the International Olympic Committee (IOC) forced a suspension some 12 hours after the first athlete had been murdered.

Twelve hours after the attack began, German police with no experience in hostage rescue were dispatched to the Olympic Village. Stupidly, their presence was filmed and broadcast on live television, enabling the terrorists to watch the police prepare to attack.

German negotiators demanded direct contact with the hostages to show that the Israelis were alive. Fencing coach Andre Spitzer, who spoke fluent German, and shooting coach Kehat Shorr, the senior member of the Israeli delegation, spoke briefly with German officials from a second-floor window. When Spitzer attempted to answer a question, he was clubbed with the butt of a rifle, also filmed on live television, and dragged from the window.

While all this was happening, news reports indicated that the hostages were alive, and that the terrorists had been killed. American broadcaster Jim McKay was reporting live when he received confirmation of the massacre: "We just got the final word ... you know, when I was a kid, my father used to say, 'Our greatest hopes and our worst fears are seldom realized.' Our worst fears have been realized tonight. They've now said that

there were 11 hostages. Two were killed in their rooms yesterday morning; nine were killed at the airport tonight. They're all gone."

The Aftermath

Following a Sept. 6 memorial that was criticized for sparse reference to the Israeli victims, the remaining Israeli athletes left Germany. Jewish athletes from other countries also left or were provided extra security.

For decades, families of some victims appealed to the IOC to establish a permanent memorial. For decades, the IOC declined, worried that a memorial to the victims could "alienate other members of the Olympic community," according to the BBC.

The IOC rejected an international campaign in support of a minute of silence at the opening ceremony of the 2012 London Olympics in memory of the Israeli victims on the massacre's 40th anniversary. Finally, the IOC conceded, honoring the Israeli victims before the 2016 Rio games.

Israel was well accustomed to war and terror. Its response was particularly resolute. Citing justice and that Israelis would not be safe anywhere, Golda Meir authorized Operation Grapes of Wrath, and the Mossad began to track down and kill those responsible for the Munich massacre.

Munich Today

Years later, one of the masterminds who escaped justice, Abu Daoud, wrote that funding for the Munich attack was provided by Mahmoud Abbas, Palestinian Authority President since 2005. Had Israel known about that then, it's possible Abbas would also have been eliminated along with the other masterminds. Now, he's president of an entity next to Israel that still supports terror.

The ghosts of Munich have also haunted U.S. politics. Today, a

candidate for Congress, Ammar Campa-Najjar, is the grandson of Muhammad Yusuf al-Najjar, a mastermind of the Munich terrorist attack. Though he repudiates his grandfather's actions, other Campa-Najjar statements have raised questions over how true that is.

Remembering the Victims

It's inappropriate to write of the victims and not mention their names. Each led a full life and left behind families and legacies that should not be forgotten, even five decades later: David Berger, Zeev Friedman, Yosef Gutfreund, Eliezer Halfin, Yossef Romano, Amitzur Shapira, Kehat Shorr, Mark Slavin, Andre Spitzer, Yakov Springer and Moshe Weinberg.

In their memory, the Genesis 123 Foundation will be holding a webinar on Sept. 9 with two current Israeli Olympians and the widow of Andre Spitzer. For information or to register please visit this page. {eo}

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