

Bryan Wharton

INSIGHT

THERE ARE several ironies in the Scheersberg story. One is the probability that Herbert Schulzen's relationship with Israel arose, in part, from injuries he sustained fighting for the Third Reich.

Boyishly good-looking, with a shock of dark hair low across forehead, Schulzen is by training a textile engineer. But through the 1960s, he was a partner in a small chemical company, Asmara Chemie, in the West German town of Wiesbaden, not far from Frankfurt.

He was also in pain. In the Second World War, Schulzen, barely 20 years old, had served in the Luftwaffe until, in 1945, he lost a brief encounter with a Mosquito. Crash landing, he suffered a serious head injury; and his wound troubled him increasingly over the years. Finally, in 1964, he was advised to undergo surgery. It was while he was convalescing that, we have discovered, the first approaches were made to him on Israel's behalf.

Since its foundation, Israel has wearily accepted that much of its trade has to be secret. The "blacklist" compiled by the Arab Boycott office in Damascus has been, over the years, the most effective Arab weapon against Israel. For fear of inclusion on the list, international companies, even governments, tend to ask that Israel keeps its secret dealings with them.

Inevitably, then, much of Israel's trade is carried out through front companies run outside Israel by sympathetic foreigners. It is equally inevitable that in the search for those likely helpers and the setting-up of those front companies, the Israeli secret service, Mossad, should play a big part.

This is especially the case in the area most vital to Israel's survival: military equipment. Most of Israel's needs are settled, openly, by the United States; but a great deal has still to be acquired elsewhere. In 1964, Herbert Schulzen and Asmara Chemie were admirably placed to help.

Asmara Chemie had been founded in Wiesbaden in April 1952 as a partnership between Herbert Schulzen and Herbert Schaff. They made and sold industrial soaps; more exactly, they bought ingredients, mixed them and packaged the results. They had no room to do more: Asmara's premises were a couple of cramped rooms off a small cobbled courtyard. But

they persevered; and, in the early 1960s, with the help of a pair of formidable salesmen, Asmara began to supply the local US military bases; they also made friends in the procurement office of the West German army. The other advance came in 1962: Herbert Scharf took them into the decontamination business. The formulae for Asmara's various creams, foams and lotions against nerve gas, blister gas and radioactive fallout were taken from Russian military textbooks.

By 1964 Asmara Chemie had a tidy niche in the defence market, with a useful range of industrial and military contacts. Its founders — particularly the younger man, Schulzen — were ambitious. And the company was small enough to be highly flexible. Schulzen was an ideal target for Mossad — especially at the moment when, after his operation, he needed a holiday in Mediterranean sun.

Ostensibly, Schulzen was invited to Israel in 1964 by a Tel Aviv furniture manufacturer. But he met a lot of convivial people — they jokingly nicknamed him "the Nazi pilot" — and he was shown around the prestigious Weizmann Research Institute. When he returned to Wiesbaden, fully recovered from his operation, he brought back warm memories and a picture book of Israel, fondly inscribed by one of his new acquaintances.

It was not long before Schulzen's visit brought Asmara orders from Israeli companies — sometimes direct, sometimes channelled through other German companies. It was straightforward commerce: one order, for instance, was for a special chemical softener used in textile manufacture.

June 1967 brought the Six Day War. It also saw changes in Asmara: Scharf, approaching 70, handed over virtual control of the company to Schulzen. It was shortly after this that the company's business with Israel took on a distinctly military hue.

First, Asmara supplied 300 of its decontamination kits to the Israeli army. Then it tried to supply advanced aerial photography equipment. (A friend of Schulzen's recalls being asked if he could find infra-red aerial cameras. The deal came to nothing, but the friend was left in no doubt about Asmara's close links with Israel.)

It was in early 1968 that Schulzen bumped into one of

The Plumbat Affair, by Elaine Davenport, Paul Eddy and Peter Gillman, is published this week by André Deutsch, price £4.95.



The Scheersberg A today: sold and renamed

The secrets of Israel's Bomb coup

The loss of 200 tons of uranium in 1968 was so embarrassing that the European Commission kept it secret for nine years. Even now, Israel denies responsibility. But INSIGHT, with Elaine Davenport, has followed the trail of clues that point to the Israeli secret service role in 'Operation Plumbat.'

his ex-salesmen and boasted that he had just pulled off his biggest deal so far with Israel. Schulzen said it involved urea, the chemical used as a fertiliser. It was only later that the salesman realised Schulzen had been making a laborious private joke: the German word for uranium is *uran*.

THE PROCESS of abstracting 200 tons of uranium oxide from a silo in Europe turns out, on examination, to have been somewhat simple.

The order for the uranium arrived at the Brussels headquarters of the Société Générale des Minerais in March 1968.

SGM is part of the giant conglomerate Société Générale de Belgique, with interests

ranging from banking to shipping, paper-making to mining. As befits its status, SGM's prestigious and somewhat old-fashioned building, in the Rue du Marais in central Brussels is solid stone with calm, wide corridors, heavy wooden doors, polished mahogany furniture and cut-glass ashtrays. The uranium order was directed to the large and comfortable office of Denis Dewez, deputy head of SGM's uranium division.

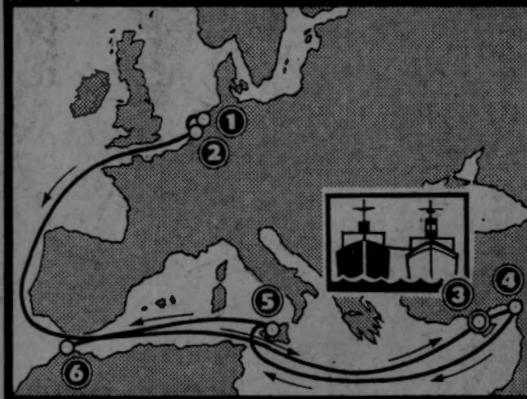
It was an order that SGM could easily fill. Another of SGM's sister companies was Union Minière, the giant mining corporation which long was the power behind Belgium's rule over the Congo. When Belgium had pulled out, Union Minière managed to ship home, among

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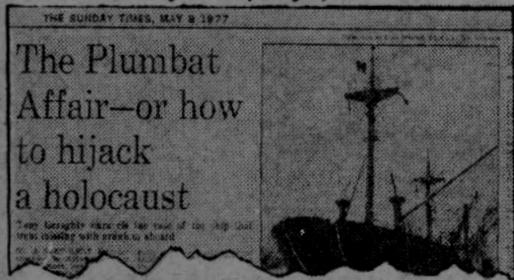
the Six). Movements of uranium they call Yarisal is always, it were... seems, away. the new owners wanted their own captain.

Peter Sullivan

OPERATION PLUMBAT

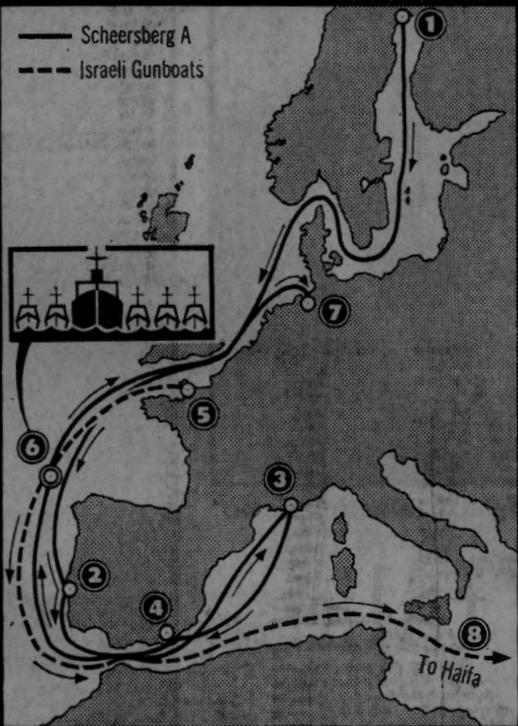


From The Sunday Times, May 8, 1977. . .



- 1: Rotterdam, Scheersberg A arrives November 11. New crew goes aboard. "Peter Barrow" remains captain. Departs November 15.
- 2: Antwerp, arrives November 16. Takes 200 tons of uranium on board. Departs next day. Destination supposedly Genoa.
- 3: Somewhere between Cyprus and Turkey on December 1, 200 tons of uranium offloaded on to Israeli freighter.
- 4: Iskenderum, Turkey, Scheersberg A arrives December 2.
- 5: Palermo, Sicily, arrives December 11. New crew laid off, old crew rehired. "Peter Barrow" replaced by new captain, Francisco Cousillas.
- 6: Ceuta, Scheersberg A arrives December 16.

OPERATION CHERBOURG



- 1: Lulea, Sweden, Scheersberg A arrives November 17. Captain Cousillas and crew laid off again. New crew taken on. Departs, November 22.
- 2: Calls at Lisbon.
- 3: Calls at Toulon.
- 4: Calls at Almeria—departs December 22.
- 5: Cherbourg, France, five Israeli gunboats leave on December 25.
- 6: Somewhere north-west of La Corunna, Spain, the Scheersberg A refuels the Israeli gunboats on December 26.
- 7: Scheersberg A continues northwards, arriving at German port of Brake on December 30.
- 8: Gunboats continue to Haifa, Israel, arriving December 31.

cargo boat. He wanted a small one, only 2,500 tons, and, unusually, he was willing to pay generously: up to £175,000. It took Moeller three weeks to find the Scheersberg. She was 2,620 tons; a survey in Rotterdam found her sound; and, after some haggling, her price was £160,000. The cash was handed over by a Hamburg bank. Five weeks after its formation, Biscayne Traders had a ship.

The deal had been so swift that the vendors of the Scheersberg, a Hamburg shipping firm, were surprised. They were still more surprised when Yarisal turned down their offer to find cargoes for him. It crossed the minds of the executives in Hamburg that the ship was perhaps to be used for gun-running, or—as one of them put it later—"for some other shady business."

Yarisal had no need of crews, either. The day after Biscayne Traders took possession of the Scheersberg, he dismissed her old crew. Their first replacements were a scratch lot drawn mainly from other Yarisal vessels. Not until October 8 did Yarisal's new captain arrive.

He was young for a merchant captain, perhaps 35, but very assured and professional. He gave his name as Peter Barrow, and he said he was from Cardiff. He had a liking for dark blue shirts and trousers, just like a navy man.

Next day, October 9, the Scheersberg—now marginally renamed the Scheersberg A, and flying the Liberian flag in place of other old German ones—began a long voyage south, taking a cargo from Emden in north Germany to Naples in southern Italy.

The crew did not realise it, but the run was a dress rehearsal.

IT IS ALMOST unfair to blame Euratom officials for their failure to monitor the Asmara deal. Political dissension within the BEC—and a fierce refusal by European governments to accept any of controls Euratom did try to enforce—had crippled the organisation. Even physically, it was dismembered; by another quirk, monitoring the Asmara deal was the job not of its Safeguards division, then moving to Luxembourg, but of the Supply division, based in Brussels.

Changing crews

Specifically, the deal was cleared by Felix Oboussier, who was a lawyer with no nuclear training. An informal talk in mid-October with Dewez of SGM satisfied him. Oboussier did say he would like a letter from Asmara confirming the details. And he did check with Euratom's technical staff the feasibility of using uranium as a catalyst. By coincidence, he learned, the Dutch Government had recently acquired uranium for just this purpose. That settled it for Oboussier. Euratom made no checks into Asmara at all. On October 30, the deal received automatic approval.

It was a few days later that the Scheersberg A's scratch crew got the bad news. Their trip to Naples completed, they were

many other things, a substantial amount of uranium oxide. It was stored in a silo near a village to the east of Antwerp. SGM was having trouble finding buyers to diminish the small mountain.

Even so, Dewez regarded the order with caution. The would-be buyer was Asmara Chemie of Wiesbaden. Nobody at SGM had ever heard of them. And since the transaction would cost several million dollars, Dewez was naturally curious to know whether this unknown company could pay.

Asmara's reply was reassuring. The necessary funds were already lodged with a bank in Zurich. The bank confirmed this. But no one in SGM had heard of the bank, either. SGM caused circumspect inquiries to

be made into its financial standing. When that proved satisfactory, SGM said it would be happy to deal with Asmara.

Schulzen's story was certainly technically plausible. Asmara, he said, was going into the mass production of petrochemicals, and needed the uranium as a catalyst in some of the proposed reactions.

But then came the heart of the matter. Before it can be used as a catalyst, uranium needs to be treated. Asmara told Dewez it had arranged for its uranium to be treated by a chemical company called Chimagar of Casablanca in Morocco. Asmara proposed to ship the uranium to Morocco, and after treatment ship it back to Wiesbaden.

There had, in fact, once been a connection between Asmara and Chimagar, but it had long ceased. In the design of the scheme the Moroccan connection was an ingenious touch, though. Had it come off, and had there been a hue and cry following the loss of the uranium, suspicion would have fallen not on Israel but on the Arab world.

A nasty moment

Unfortunately, as Dewez now pointed out, Asmara had overlooked an inconvenient fact. Germany was part of the Euro-

pean Community, and Schulzen, in Milan with his proposition, Sertorio and his company were in no shape to turn it down.

There were a few worries. SAICA had no plant to handle uranium; Schulzen suggested they might borrow one just up the road. And Sertorio had no idea what the supposed conversion process would entail; Schulzen said he would send written instructions with the uranium.

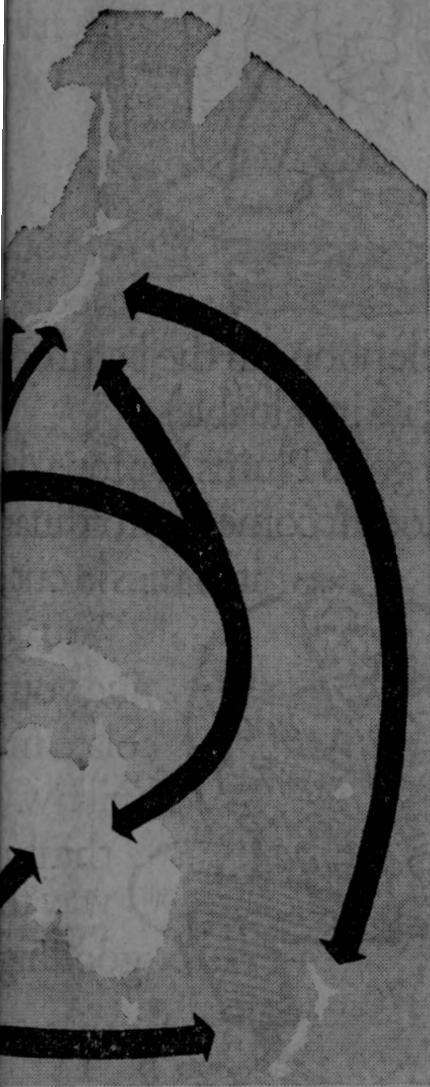
AS DENIS DEWEZ returned from Wiesbaden to Brussels to process Asmara's order, and SAICA prepared for the vast consignment in Milan, another act in the carefully orchestrated drama was taking place in Zurich, the financial capital of Switzerland. On August 19, 1968, a Swiss lawyer named Gerd Lanz was hired to set up a shipping corporation under a Liberian flag of convenience.

Liberia has a Zurich office for just such applications. Twenty-four hours later, the Biscayne Traders Shipping Corporation was registered. Next day, the president of this new company was named in Liberian legal records as Burham M. Yarisal.

Of all the characters caught up in the Scheersberg affair, none is more elusive than Burham Yarisal. Even people who have done much business with him cannot contact him directly.

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into and within the Six were controlled by an EEC agency called Euratom. As nuclear watchdogs went, it was pretty pathetic, with no bite and little bark. But to sanction exporting uranium from the community even on a temporary basis Euratom would have to seek permission from the EEC's executive, the European Commission. Dewez warned Asmara that leave to export the uranium to Casablanca would be neither quick nor easy to get.

Asmara told Dewez it would look for another company within the EEC. Meanwhile, Asmara said, negotiations over price, delivery and so on should continue.

Up to this point, the late summer of 1968, negotiations had been conducted by letter or telephone, leaving SGM happily ignorant of the fact that Asmara was a very modest little company indeed. Then Dewez called Schulzen—and proposed politely that he should visit Wiesbaden for final face-to-face negotiations.

It was a nasty moment. Once Dewez saw for himself the cobbled courtyard leading to the tiny entrance of Asmara's cramped offices, he would realise the impossibility of even finding room there for 200 tons of uranium, let alone doing anything with it.

Schulzen, with his long experience as a salesman, responded in the most gracious way possible—inviting Dewez to his own home complete with swimming pool and three-car garage in the village of Hettenhain, tucked amid pine-clad hills ten miles or so from Wiesbaden.

The meeting went smoothly. There were several men present besides Schulzen. Dewez assumed they were from Asmara, including, he supposed, at least one scientific or technical expert. He further assumed they were all Germans: that was the language they spoke to each other. Dewez himself did not speak German; the negotiations were in English.

When it came to the unfortunate snag presented by the Moroccan company, Schulzen was able to announce that he had now found another processor—in Milan.

There was just one tiny hitch, Schulzen said. Italy was a long way from Belgium: the easiest way to get such a cumbersome load there would be by ship. That would mean the uranium leaving the EEC for the length of the voyage. Would that technicality present any problems?

Dewez thought not. A voyage on the high seas did not really constitute exportation. In any event, Dewez said, when he returned to Brussels SGM would draw up a contract which could be submitted to Euratom for approval.

Just as SGM had felt no curiosity about Asmara's background, it now displayed no interest in the Italian company. That, too, was fortunate.

Schulzen had chosen SAICA on the strength of a personal friendship with its owner, the tall and aristocratic-looking Francesco Sertorio, that went back 20 years. It was a shrewd choice for other reasons too. SAICA sold dyes for the textile industry—rather unsuccessfully. By 1968, when Schulzen arrived

they can't. Yarisal is always... seems, away. Court archives in Milan reveal that he was born on August 28, 1919 in Tekirdag, a Turkish port about 50 miles west of Istanbul. The rest is fragments. A seaman, who once met him on a French dockside, recalls a short, heavy-set man, black hair turning grey, well dressed, a non-smoker and non-drinker. Another man, a shipbroker, speaks of Yarisal's fondness for animals, and his personal kindness. He is said to speak English, French, Italian and, naturally, Turkish. He has



Schulzen: bought for Israel.

been married, but is now parted from his wife, who lives in a Geneva apartment with one of their two daughters.

Yarisal's other daughter works in the nearest thing he seems to have to a base: a tiny room on an eighth floor in Genoa, which is the office of Yarisal's main company, the Falken Shipping Corporation. She refuses to discuss her father's history or his present whereabouts (a sentiment Yarisal shared when we spoke to him by telephone in Geneva.)

The shipbrokers of Genoa, however, do know quite a lot about Mr Yarisal. They tell a lively tale.

Yarisal got his start after World War Two in Ethiopia. The country had become a dumping ground for the debris of war: mountains of weapons and ammunition from both sides. There were fabulous arms deals to be made.

Yarisal, it is said, based himself in the Ethiopian city of Direedawa, went into partnership with a fellow Turk, and began to sell this surplus equipment to the needy. That category included the Jewish settlers in Palestine, preparing for the full-scale war with the Arabs which they knew lay ahead.

Yarisal's partner then died; and Yarisal moved to Cairo. Egypt under King Farouk welcomed such men. Aged about 30, Yarisal set himself up as an international entrepreneur.

Over the three decades since, Yarisal has been prepared to deal in almost any commodity. Indeed, he has won a reputation for being willing to take risks, such as trading in Vietnam and in Lebanon at the height of their respective wars, when the dangers were high, but so were the profits, especially in oil and arms.

IN LATE August 1968, Yarisal telephoned a Hamburg shipbroker with whom he had done business for ten years, Uwe Moeller, and asked him to find a

were all to be discharged. Yarisal had sold the ship, he said, and the new owners wanted their own crew—and their own captain. Duly, when the Scheersberg A reached Rotterdam on November 11, the crew were paid off.

Four days later, on November 15, the Scheersberg A left for Antwerp, to load the uranium. There were only two oddities about the process. Herbert Schulzen of Asmara turned up unannounced and, the dock loading manager recalls, he was accompanied by a short, fat man wearing spectacles, who fussed over the cargo and even counted the drums.

The other oddity was the Scheersberg A's new crew. It was half the normal number, and the deckhands were all white. And the captain was an assured, professional young skipper with a predilection for dark blue shirts and trousers, just like a navy man. He said his name was Peter Barrow.

A few minutes after midnight, on Sunday, November 17, the Scheersberg A sailed, the 200 tons of uranium oxide safely in her hold. They were packed in drums stencilled "Plumbat"—the name Mossad had chosen for the operation. Her declared destination was Genoa.

She never arrived. On December 2 she appeared in the eastern Turkish port of Iskenderum. Captain Barrow told the port authorities she was empty, which was true, and that she had come from Naples, which was not. Barrow and his crew then took the boat back to Palermo in Sicily—and disappeared.

Once again, Yarisal now put the old scratch crew aboard. One of them, the chief engineer, said he thought Yarisal had sold the vessel. "Ah well," Yarisal replied, "I've bought her back." Curious to see where the ship had been in the previous month, the crew turned to her log. The last two pages had been torn out.

IT WAS SEVEN months before the supposed watchdog, Euratom, even knew for sure that the uranium had gone astray. (SAICA's failure to notify receipt of the cargo, or to answer letters, Euratom blamed on the Italian postal service.)

When the director of Euratom's safeguards division, Enrico Jacchia, did finally question Asmara Chemie, he got nowhere. Schulzen blandly replied that Asmara had bought the uranium "on the instructions of a client." The client had first wanted the load shipped to SAICA but had then "decided differently." At that point, Asmara had ceased to be involved.

Who, Jacchia asked, was Asmara's client? The response came from an eminent law firm in the West German capital, Bonn. The identity of Asmara's client, the lawyers said, was a matter of "commercial confidence" which Euratom was forbidden by its charter to breach. Beyond referring the matter to the police forces of the three countries involved—Germany,

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Hazel Clarke

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...Even when the official term of
...exile ends, its effect continues—
...for the prisoner may still not be
...free to return to his old home,
...especially if it was in one of
...the bigger cities.

Reuben Ainsztein

Israel gets the Bomb

Continued from page 6

Belgium and Italy—Euratom could do no more.

Nor did the police inquiries get anywhere. Only the German police, in fact, made serious efforts. They even boarded the Scheersberg A when she next entered German waters a year later—to be baffled by the same expurgated log.

Back at Euratom, Jacchia could only marvel at what he calls "the architectural beauty" of the plot. The members of the European Commission, meeting in secret to consider the affair at the end of 1969, seem to have agreed. They decided to close the file, and keep the loss secret. As one EEC official said later: "It would have made our security regulations look a little ridiculous."

Privately, though, few in the EEC had any doubts that Israel was responsible: that the Scheersberg A had hove to somewhere off Cyprus and that the cargo had been transferred at sea. Nor were there many doubts about its destination: Dimona, the Israeli reactor south of Beersheba in the Negev desert—where, by slow stages, the uranium could be converted into the nuclear explosive, plutonium.

But there was no proof. Publicly, indeed, there is still none. Since the outline of the Scheersberg story finally leaked last year—after a Euratom official had talked incautiously to an American Senate lawyer worried about the dangers of nuclear proliferation—the Israeli Government has consistently denied responsibility.

The secret truth is rather different. In July 1973—almost five years after the Scheersberg incident—an Israeli agent, captured in Norway and facing charges of espionage and murder, confessed his role in the affair. He also revealed that a year after the uranium heist, the Scheersberg A had been used in another Israeli operation: as re-fuelling vessel for the five gunboats that Israel hi-jacked from Cherbourg with great panache on Christmas Day 1969 in the teeth of a French arms embargo.

The agent was Dan Aerbel. He and five other Israeli operatives were arrested by the Norwegian police after one of the more botched operations in the long and savage war between Israel and the Palestinians: the shooting of an Arab waiter in the Norwegian town of Lillehammer in the mistaken belief that he



Agent Dan Aerbel: talked

was a leader of Black September.

The 1973 killing got world headlines. But the Norwegians never published Aerbel's confession, and in the subsequent trials the prosecutor mentioned nothing of what he had said.

For Aerbel told virtually everything he knew about Mossad's operations in Europe. In part, he seems to have thought that if he persuaded the Norwegians he was acting for the Israeli Government, they would release him. In part, he seems to have broken after a night in the police cells — Aerbel pleaded he was claustrophobic.

Aerbel, back in Israel after serving 19 months of a five-year sentence, now denies having made any confession. But the details on Norwegian police files—names of Mossad controllers, telephone numbers, even the addresses of Mossad apartments in Paris and Rome—make fascinating reading.

Like that of most agents, however, Aerbel's knowledge was narrow. His acquaintance with the doings of the Scheersberg A was a case in point.

Yarisal had stepped down from the presidency of Biscayne Traders. Mossad installed Aerbel in his place. And Aerbel had still been in charge—though knowing nothing of the details of the operation—when the Scheersberg A rendezvoused off the Bay of Biscay with the five Israeli gunboats escaping from Cherbourg. (Our map shows how the Scheersberg's movements—plotted from records at Lloyds'—neatly intersected the gunboats' course at the crucial moment.)

In wrapping up Israel's acquisition of uranium, however, it is necessary to quote only the two key sentences of Aerbel to his Norwegian interrogator.

"I owned the Scheersberg A," Aerbel said. "So what?" the interrogator asked.

"It carried the uranium to Israel."

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