

The Eli Cohen Files

Part III: Capture, Trial, and Execution

By Wesley Britton

[Abstract: Examines and analyzes the circumstances leading up to Eli Cohen's capture in Damascus, including the possible failures and motives of Cohen. Summarizes the events surrounding his trial, international appeals on his behalf, and execution.]

The Fatal Flaws

In 1987, actor John Shea played Eli Cohen in an HBO/BBC co-produced TV docu-drama called *The Impossible Spy*. According to producer Harvey Chertok, the film was made possible with the approval of the Israeli government, the Mossad, and Cohen's widow, Nadia. He said Meir Amit, played by Eli Wallach in the film, read the script and said, "That's exactly how it was." (Britton 2006)

Well, not exactly. Any script vetted by Israeli authorities would clearly have to show their national hero in a glowing, positive light. In addition, scriptwriters are prone to dramatic exaggeration. For example, the film has Cohen's capture resulting from his willingness to sacrifice himself to warn Tel Aviv of an impending Syrian attack on a defenseless Kibbutz. A heroic moment, but not mentioned in most historical accounts.

Still, the well-made movie's central theme focuses on an important concern about the character of Eli Cohen. Shea's Cohen is at first a reluctant agent who, by degrees, becomes enamored with his mission. In the script, the Mossad chief tells Cohen when it's time to come in from the cold,

but Cohen resists, wanting to go one last time into the lion's den. This too, doesn't square with other accounts, but the point remains – what was the fatal flaw in Eli Cohen that led to his final capture? Was he a man too caught up in the high-life to want to return to a more routine domestic setting or was he reckless, careless, or even acting out suicidal impulses in 1964?

This is a question that must be explored from a variety of angles. To begin, there was certainly tension inside Cohen, or any other agent on such a mission for that matter, regarding his home life and his undercover activities. During his long mission, Eli Cohen had a growing family to attend to back in Israel. During his business trips to Europe, on the premise of visiting a dummy front company, Cohen would take a quick flight to Israel and report personally to his superiors, as well as see his wife and family. (Katz 169) According to Maurice Cohen, “The rest of us Cohens, of course, knew nothing of Eli's other life. He told us that the Israeli government had charged him with the purchase of spare computer parts and other electronic instruments that were off limits to Israelis, for fear they'd be used for military purposes. This job, he added, required him to be based in Europe but travel widely. Looking back, I see I was naïve to believe these fairy tales. But I bought into his lies as easily as did Nadia.” (M2)

One circumstance involving the two brothers illustrates the difficulty of blending two existences so widely separate. During this period, Maurice too was working as a part-time cryptographer for Israeli intelligence. “By this time I had worked my way up through the hierarchy of the Mossad and was toiling in a high security, top secret unit that decoded and encrypted messages. At first I knew nothing about the messages I was decoding; they seemed like random words with no apparent significance. Then, as I honed my skills, it became clear that the transmissions were coming out of Damascus, from the agent we all called ‘Our Man in Damascus.’” (M2)

According to Maurice's memoirs, this cryptology work led to one of the most unusual sibling connections in espionage history. “Through a twist of fate,” he wrote, “I was made responsible for all the codes Mossad ‘activators’ used to communicate with Our Man in Damascus. He and his contacts typically sent messages that ended with a personal tidbit. It was these postscripts that led me to suspect that Our Man in Damascus was none other than my brother, Eli.” (M2) His suspicions began with a postscript to one message which read, “Did Nadia get the Singer sewing machine I sent her?” No code words “Nadia” or “Singer Sewing Machine” appeared in the code book. “My superiors couldn't translate the note either and informed me that none of us was cleared to decode such top secret sensitive materials.” (M2) He then went to his sister-in-law's home and saw a Singer machine and she told him Eli had sent it. She even showed him how to sew buttons with it. (M5)

Then, he saw another personal message, this time one sent to the man in Damascus. It concluded with, “Mlle. Fifi a commencé à marcher.” [Miss Fifi has begun to walk.] “I knew that my niece Sophie – named after her grandmother and carrying her nickname – had been delayed in taking her first steps and that Eli had been concerned about it.” (M2) Obviously, this was a message sent to a concerned father so he could now focus more on his mission. (M5) “Now that I was certain Our Man in Damascus was my own brother, the secret gnawed at my insides, and I was dying to reveal it. But to whom? And to what end? I was tortured by the knowledge of my brother's high risk mission. I had ferreted out the truth; now I had to swallow it and keep it deep within my belly.” (M2) At first, this was no easy task. At night, Maurice had bad dreams and

screamed to the point where his wife called for a doctor. This doctor suggested hospitalization but then backed away when he saw insignia on Maurice's uniform indicating his intelligence unit. (M5)

This knowledge led to an unusual encounter. Some months later, Maurice reported, Eli visited his family and presented young Sophie with a pair of velvet slippers. The shoes were embroidered with golden thread with sizes in Arabic numbers imprinted on the soles. When Maurice asked where his brother had found the slippers, he said they were bought at a department store in Paris. Maurice asked why French shoes would have Arabic sizes, and Eli "chided me for interrogating him and said that they were probably manufactured in an Arab country and exported all over the world. He then abruptly and definitively changed the subject."

Wanting to learn the truth, Maurice pressed his brother. "He knew that I had had a hard time getting telephone service in my new apartment as phone lines were still not common in Israel. 'You work for the Postal Service,' he remarked one day, unaware that I too was a Mossad agent. 'It should be easy for you to get a line.' I told him I now had a phone and gave the number of his apartment in Damascus, which I had received in a message just before he'd come home. "He began writing the number but stopped abruptly and, looking flushed and flustered, mumbled under his breath about needing to run out to the supermarket before it closed. I had gotten under his cover." (M2) Eli immediately found a phone booth and called his supervisors, angry for the security breach. They assured him it must have been some sort of coincidence – how could a postal worker have access to this information? (M5)

Soon after, Maurice's commanding officers summoned him to his base and informed him that Eli had spoken to them about the phone number incident. They warned Maurice not to discuss the issue with Eli anymore and to share his secret with no one. "And so the truth remained trapped within me. If I shared the secret with my family, even if they could keep it, I would cause them unspeakable worry and pain. If I breached security and told anyone else, I would place my country in a vulnerable position. One word from me, and Eli's mission could be aborted, his life endangered. My brother had bravely chosen to put himself in danger to protect his country. I chose to honor his commitment, leaving his fate in God's hands." (M2)

If this anecdote is accurate, several questions arise. How could Israel's intelligence agencies put two brothers into this risky situation of overlapping duties? Avraham Cohen posits "perhaps they did not know." He says, "at the Yahrtzeit (death anniversary) for Eli, the Mossad showed me his CV but it was not correct." He said there was wrong and missing information. Avraham thought the application was probably written in Eli's handwriting, and "There was nothing about Suzanna or anything about what he did in Egypt." (A4)

In addition, the personal "tidbits" Maurice reported indicated the messages coming in from Damascus included details potentially very dangerous, whomever sat at the de-coding machine or, worse, in any Syrian counterpart where codes might have been broken. Gordon Thomas alleges Cohen had always been a soccer fan and, the day after a visiting team beat Israel in Tel Aviv, Eli broke the strict "Business only" rule about transmissions. He radioed his operator: "It is about time we learned to be victorious on the soccer field." Other unauthorized messages were

translated: “Please send my wife an anniversary greeting,” or “Happy Birthday to my daughter.” (Thomas *Gideon* 61)

Why wasn't attention drawn to this lapse? Maurice indicated other agents also sent personal notes, and other sources support this notion. But Eli's transmissions were, according to one interview with Meir Amit, a matter that made the spy chief privately furious. But he understood enough of the pressures on the agent to hope Cohen's behavior was “no more than a temporary aberration often found in the best of agents. I tried to get inside his head. Was he desperate and this was his way of showing it by dropping his guard? I tried to think like him, knowing I'd rewritten his life. I had to try and weigh a hundred factors. But in the end the only important one was: could Eli still do his job?” (Thomas *Gideon* 62) Clearly, this was risky behavior and one insight into the mindset of Eli Cohen, an agent living with a double-consciousness, half in the danger zone, half in a home he barely knew.

In the view of the handler known as G, the contrast between Cohen's true self and the social animal that was Kamel is not unlike the difference between an actor and the part he plays. “To tell you the truth,” G said in a 2006 interview, “if I had just met him casually once or twice in a café, I wouldn't have been sure that he was up to the job. But he turned out to be an excellent actor. He played the part one hundred percent.” (Florsheim and Shilon) Maurice Cohen too had qualms about some of the transmissions, but for very different reasons. He learned Eli had to aid the Syrian government acquire munitions and helped purchase them with Israeli funds. But Maurice later said this was one of the twists of fate in such missions, it being better to “know your enemy” than risk tarnishing a source. (M5)

Most controversy about the personal desires of Eli Cohen focus on his inclinations in the final months of his mission. Eli returned to Israel in November 1964 to be present at the birth of his third child, his son Shaul. During this visit, Nadia later reported, he appeared to be concerned about his continued stay in Syria. She thought this should be his final trip abroad. After meeting with his handlers, however, Eli returned to Damascus, even increasing the frequency of his radio transmissions. To this day, the Mossad and Cohen's wife disagree about Eli Cohen's desires. Nadia claims that during his meeting with his handlers, he expressed fears about returning to Damascus, and only after they pressured him did he agree to go back. (This account wouldn't square with all the other reports that Nadia knew nothing of Eli's work until his capture.) Meir Amit argues just the opposite. He recalled that during their talk, he ordered Cohen to be doubly careful, but despite this advice, the spy continued to transmit often – too often. (Florsheim and Shilon)

Was Eli Cohen infatuated with his secret life or was he becoming fearful he was coming too close to the flames? On one hand, Eli Cohen had been operating in clandestine operations of one sort or another for most of his life. With the exception of the four years he wasn't involved in undercover operations in Israel, Cohen had been serving Zionism since the early 1950s. His time out of the service was a mixed blessing – his marriage a high point in his life, but he was living his days supporting his family with routine accounting labors. For a man of his talents and inclinations, there must have been a drive to keep close to the decision makers in Middle Eastern history.

While it would be cruel to overstate the case, there have been whispers within the Mossad that Eli had no wish to return to his married life. He had a wife he barely knew, it is said, and her demands on him only exasperated their differences. Nadia herself has pointed to such tensions. On his last, brief trip home, just months before he was captured, the couple argued and felt the anxiety of their distance acutely. “The children were with me; I had no one to help me. He understood how hard it was . . . Each time he was home, there'd be one less smile, and I'd be very nervous. Not everything was about flowers and kisses and hugs. There were a lot of tears and difficulties.” (Hockstader)

Beyond his own domestic relations, Eli Cohen certainly shared the same psychological difficulties of all “resident agents,” those working undercover for long periods of time. In particular, his situation must have been akin to that of Wolfgang Lotz, the Israeli spy in Egypt who, too, lived the high-life to the point where he was dubbed “The Champagne Spy.” Describing his research for his 2007 documentary on Lotz, film maker Nadav Schirman noted key scenes he saw in footage shot by Lotz’s son during visits with his family. “In the footage he shot, you clearly see Lotz, during his secret visits to Paris (1962-1964) – how he’s distanced himself from the family. His body language fascinated me. He seemed to be getting deeper in another identity and though he's there with his wife and son he seems not there, his mind some other place. The physical distance between him and his wife in every shot was striking . . . The hardships that he endured, like the loneliness on the mission, the identity crisis when returning home, the addiction to his ‘second skin’ – all these seem to be part of that period's undercover agents, or ‘warriors’ as they were called by the Mossad.” (Britton 2007) **(Note 1)**

On the other hand, according to Samuel Katz, Eli Cohen had been horrified by the brutal Ba'athist purges of Nasserites from the Syrian government and military as well as the totalitarian hand that descended on Syrian culture. (Katz 169) In Katz’s view, this led to Cohen’s faltering as a spy, wanting to come in from the cold. Cohen now felt threatened in Syria, especially in the company of Col. Ahmed Su'edeni, the commander of Syrian Military Intelligence. The colonel apparently disliked Ta'abet, jealous of the newcomer from Argentina. (Katz 169) At the same time, Cohen must have understood the political implications of his unique position. During his brief time in Israel, on November 13, 1964, Syrian posts opened fire over the Zahal guard patrol and bombarded the Kibbutzim of Dan, Dafne and Shaar Yashuv. In order to silence the enemy’s guns and fire sources, Zahal operated 40 aircraft, and used tanks to bombard the surrounding army stand. Syria suffered heavy losses in this duel. (M 1) It’s more than likely, as discussed in Part II of these files, the Cohen had provided the intelligence allowing the Israel air force specific locations for targeting. Even while ostensibly on vacation, then, Eli Cohen would have seen the news reports and known of his part in the drama. In short, this patriotic spy knew he had secured a valuable role virtually impossible to duplicate. Were he to come in, who could replace him?

To correct another myth, it’s been claimed that “when AMAN's Unit 188 (the successor to the ill-starred Unit 131 of the Lavon Affair), was transferred to Mossad in 1964,” this violated standard tradecraft as Eli’s handler would have been changed to someone who didn’t know or understand his new agent. (Black & Morris 227) True enough, Unit 188 and the Communications Department, in which Maurice served, were originally dedicated as AMAN. There had been leadership changes throughout the early 1960s. From 1952-63, Isser Harel had directed both the

Shin Bet (the Israeli internal security service) and the Mossad for foreign operations. Before Eli Cohen was activated, in 1961, Meir Amit was the Major General at the head of IDF Intelligence before succeeding Chaim Herzog as the director of AMAN the following year. Assuming leadership of the Mossad on March 25, 1963, Amit replaced Isser Harel after he was forced to resign due to disagreements with Ben Gurion and a number of embarrassing incidents. At some point, Unit 188 in its entirety transferred to Mossad, so Eli Cohen's handler never changed. According to many sources, nothing at all really changed in the Unit. Politically, it should be noted that Mossad – and not AMAN – got the raw reports from Unit 131 and then 188 and interpreted them for the Defense Minister and Prime Minister. Rather than creating redundant departments, the Communications Department continued to cipher for both AMAN and Mossad and, perhaps, gave a potential mole twice the bounty.

In this complex milieu, it's not hard to understand the central fatal flaw for Eli Cohen – a simple human desire to communicate, even when messages home were spun in codes, with personal notes only cryptic tags added onto official reports. In the city of Damascus, there was no Eli Cohen – there was only Kamal Amin Ta'abet, a persona living a life becoming more dangerous by the day, and even more lonely as this identity was living on borrowed time. The man Eli Cohen slept in an apartment of empty rooms, maintained with unrelenting caution. Kamal Amin Ta'abet dispensed smiles, lies, and money while Eli Cohen spent his quiet hours cleaning his rooms with no voice to express itself or reach out – other than the radio where, if nothing else, he was telling the truth about what he saw. Perhaps his time grew tapping on his keys as a man named Eli Cohen simply needed more time being Eli Cohen. His tradecraft in every other aspect was that of the true masterspy. Perhaps he had been one far too long. Or perhaps he saw a light at the end of the tunnel. According to Eli Ben-Hanan, one interviewer was granted a few minutes with Cohen just before his execution. In it, Cohen maintained, “My assignment was to end on our Independence Day, at the beginning of next May.” (Ben-Hanan 126)

Air Time

By most accounts, whatever Cohen's mental state, he burned himself in the end by his overuse of his radio. “Those agents who had wireless instruments had to be contacted by us at certain times,” G said later, “But Cohen also took the initiative himself. No doubt this was connected with his drive to succeed in his mission, but it may well be one of the things that led to his downfall.” According to the handler, the real problem was not the way the transmissions were made, the times at which they were made, or the code used – but their frequency. “Even if you told him not to transmit unless he had something to report,” G said, “he would still transmit more than once a week.” (Florsheim and Shilon)

G recalls that there were certain misgivings among Mossad handlers, but nothing that reached the stage of a general warning. “We were worried, yes, but not sufficiently worried to take action.... In hindsight, it's easy to say that maybe I should have shut him down completely. In any case, we had warned Eli not to transmit so frequently. But he was his own man. Despite all our warnings, he simply said, ‘Don't worry. It'll be okay.’” (Florsheim and Shilon)

The Capture

Whether forced to continue in Damascus against his deepest desires, a man with conflicting motives, or still an enthusiastic secret agent, Cohen took actions both extremely risky and extraordinarily careless when he journeyed back to Syria for the last time. In late 1964, Cohen had now returned to a different, post-revolution Damascus, even more volatile, more suspicious, and more threatened by the Egyptian-Syrian alliance opposed to the new regime. The head of Syrian intelligence, Colonel Ahmad Suweidani, had decided to track down leaks, helped by the Soviets. In particular, Colonel Su'edeni was zeroing in on the unknown spy with the help of Glavno Razvedyvatelnoe Upravlenie (GRU, the Russian acronym for Soviet Military Intelligence) personnel who were sent to Syria to operate highly sophisticated radio-tracking devices. (Katz 171) Apparently, the Soviets were nervous about classified material, especially concerning their modern weapons systems, reaching Israel and, inevitably, NATO intelligence files.

According to G, “They did all kinds of things to try to catch spies . . . For example, they would cut off the electricity to specific areas of the city while transmissions were occurring. When the transmission suddenly stopped, they knew they had found the right neighborhood. In this way, they were able increasingly to narrow it down to a given spy’s exact location. In fact, one time they traced a transmission to Cohen’s very building – they broke in and searched the apartment of a UN officer who happened to be living next door.” (Florsheim and Shilon) Clearly, this should have sent up a red flag. But by this time, Cohen’s broadcasts were so long and frequent that embassies nearby complained to the Syrians that their own radio transmissions were encountering interference. (Katz 169)

One assertion has been that Cohen provided the Syrians another means to place him under suspicion. According to Dan Raviv and Yossi Melman’s 1990 *Every Spy a Prince: The Complete History of Israel's Intelligence Community*, the timing of Eli’s trips likely helped his watchers match his absences with the stopping and resumption of the radio transmissions. However, in an online version of “A Brother’s Story,” Maurice Cohen noted, “Eli would get vacations to visit Israel. During these times, false messages would be sent to the same destination in order to fool the enemy.” Of course, this wouldn’t have helped when the Syrians were looking for broadcast points within Damascus. It has also been claimed the Syrians were exercising official radio silence for 24 hours, waiting for the tell-tale broadcast to begin. Simultaneously, the story goes, they disseminated a piece of confidential information on purpose to set up the spy. (Yarid) In particular, a false alert had been issued about an imminent attack on Israel which Eli thought he had to immediately send home. Having just returned from Israel, he didn’t know about the radio blackout. (M5)

Other theories included the Egyptian line which was that Cohen was uncovered only after he accompanied Egyptian General Ali Amer on an inspection trip to the Syrian Israeli border. Eli Cohen, in a photo taken during this visit, was identified as the person who had been arrested while he lived in Egypt. (Sanua) And yet another hypothesis was that the code books of the “man

on the horse,” another Israeli spy who was captured while working in the Egyptian desert, implicated Cohen. (Yarid)

Avraham Cohen says Israeli authorities accepted the Syrian version, “But at the trial they had copies of cables from ‘62 and ‘63. Maybe they just didn't know what they were.” He thinks not enough discussion has pointed to a mole inside Israeli intelligence. Avraham points out that when Israel’s man in Cairo, Wolfgang Lotz was arrested just one month after his brother, the Egyptian Mukhabarat went directly to Lotz’s library and removed his German copy of *Anna Karenina*, the book he used to code his messages. “Lotz testified that he had never so much as touched the book before locking the doors to his study and pulling the shades closed. Lotz was astounded. They told him ‘no intelligence service is immune to internal penetration.’” (A4) Only those in the Communications Department – Maurice Cohen's department – would know which books were used to cipher messages for each of the transmitting operatives. Those who coded messages back in Tel Aviv, according to Maurice, never had any idea of the real or covert identity of their agents. They would, of course know where the agent was located. (M3)

As with so many aspects of the Cohen story, accounts vary regarding the specific circumstances of his arrest. Both G and Amit are convinced that Cohen’s capture was pure chance: If he hadn’t been transmitting at the moment the scanner was on, he may never have been caught. However, in his testimony at the trial of Eli Cohen, Colonel Su'edeni stated on January 18, 1965, “After we had located the source of the broadcasts, we planned the invasion of his apartment for eight A.M., on the assumption that at that hour he would still be in bed. The break-in was planned in such a way that he wouldn’t be able to resist, or even commit suicide by jumping out the window. Three trained security men were ordered to burst into the bedroom. One of them was given the job of flattening himself on Elie. The whole operation was supposed to be over in less than five minutes.” (Ben-Hanan 123) But, to their surprise, they caught Cohen red-handed.

Once Cohen had been captured, the Syrians attempted to force him to make misleading transmissions to the Mossad. The keying rate and the secret code he used, however, made it clear to the Mossad that these were not normal transmissions. “The Syrians didn’t know that we had a signal, that we could know if it was him or not,” G said later. (Florsheim and Shilon) Maurice Cohen noted the Code was in groups of five letters or numbers, and leaving out one in the first set signaled the agent was captured. In addition, “Morse Code is like a fingerprint, handwriting. If someone else types the message, it will be known.” (M 5) When the Syrians realized that Cohen was of no use to them, they sent a cable through the Mossad to then Israeli prime minister Levi Eshkol. They referred to him as ‘Principle Leader’ as addressing him by his title would have been tantamount to acknowledging Israel:

To Levi Eshkol, principle leader:

Kamal and friends are our guests for three years.

Calm down about the fate of what is to come.

Military organization of Syria

The Trial

Quickly, news of Eli's capture reached his handler. "The head of a certain unit at the Mossad called me to say that he wanted to tell me a certain name, and that I should tell him if it meant anything to me. I asked him to go ahead, and he told me. I told him to put the phone down, that I'd be over at his office right away. I asked him what this was all about, and he told me that his unit had a report that this individual had been captured. I went back to my unit and said, 'Guys, it's over.' We all felt as if the ceiling had caved in. It was such a total, awful shock." (Florsheim and Shilon)

Just as quickly, the news filled newspapers around the globe. On March 5, 1965, *Time* magazine reported on two incidents inside Syria. First, "In the chill of dawn, naturalized U.S. citizen Farhan Attassi, 37, was hanged in Damascus' Al Marjah Square. Attached to the white robe customary for a condemned criminal was a large poster stating the verdict. For seven hours the limp body swayed on the gibbet, watched by curious crowds, before it was cut down and taken away for burial. On the same day, Attassi's cousin and alleged accomplice in spying for the U.S., Syrian Lieut. Colonel Abdel Muin Hakemi, 43, was shot in the courtyard of a Damascus army barracks." (**Note 2**) The Attassi Case, which had started as "just another televised Damascus spy thriller," began after the Syrians charged that Attassi had obtained from Hakemi eleven shells of a new Soviet anti-aircraft gun of the Syrian armed forces and had handed them over to Walter Snowdon, second secretary of the U.S. embassy in Damascus, who was expelled ("Of Hate and Espionage").

Without realizing it, the report contained a foreshadowing of the fate of Eli Cohen. "Before going to trial, he had been tortured by electricity, beaten, brainwashed and starved. U.S. officials were not allowed to see him in jail, he was not provided with legal counsel, and only carefully edited portions of his secret trial had been televised. Attassi, although he was the nephew of one of Syria's former Presidents and a cousin of Nouredin Attassi, the second-ranking man in the present Baath government, had to be hanged as a warning to all agents of 'imperialism, capitalism and Zionism.'" ("Of Hate")

In the same article, *Time* observed: "Barely was Attassi disposed of when Syria's military tribunal announced another espionage case in the offing. Billed as the master agent was Elie Cohn, an Egyptian Jew who stands accused – with no fewer than 63 accomplices, including 17 women – of spying for Israel. In neighboring Lebanon, Beirut's violently anti-Baath newspaper Al Moharren reported that Cohn had passed himself off as a Syrian expatriate millionaire named Kamel Amin Tabet, and had become a close friend of Baathist President General Amin Hafez by bankrolling his party's activities. Cohn-Tabet became a member of Baath's top leadership and broadcast coded messages to Israel over Damascus radio during programs directed at Syrians living abroad.

"Syria's regime indignantly denied that a Jew could have become a top Baath leader but conceded that for years Cohn-Tabet has been passing Syrian secrets to the Israelis. According to

one rumor, he was on the closest terms with three of the five members of the military court that is about to try him.” (“Of Hate”)

A few months later, Sout Al-Arab (Voice of the Arabs), an Egyptian radio service, began expressing joy over the capture – not for Syrian good fortune, but that that they had allowed themselves to be penetrated. According to Hani Yarid, Sout Al-Arab rubbed salt in the wound when they hastily came up with an anti-Syrian song with a bitter refrain:

Where is the Baath?
In El-Mazzih!! (Yarid)

El-Mazzih, as it happened, was the name of Cohen’s prison. While he likely didn’t know it, two cells down sat a Syrian Jew hauled in as the police looked for possible collaborators. According to “A,” who prefers to remain anonymous even after all these years, prior to Eli’s capture, the severe limitations placed on Syrian Jews in 1947 were beginning to ease. During the first days of March 1965, he recalls, the Jewish community gathered around the few televisions in the community to watch Eli Cohen’s trial, a man they knew nothing of. “The minute I saw his face, I knew there would be trouble,” A says. He immediately remembered Eli’s face as a man for whom he had written an extensive receipt at his family’s store. A would find out later that Eli shopped in his parents store a number of times but that Eli normally wrote his own receipts on store stationary because the regular (non-family) employee could neither read nor write.

“The very next day, I tell you, the very next day they [secret police] came for me.” A bargained to get half an hour to return home to tell his mother and check store records in order to refresh his memory. “I couldn’t know for sure why they came; perhaps it was for something else. So, when they asked me if I knew why I was here, I told them ‘No’.”

A was held in El-Mazzih prison for 33 days. Bright lights were left on 24 hours a day; he slept on a cement floor with only a small blanket in the March cold. He shared a cell with a military official who had taken Eli all over the country and shown him installations. This cell-mate, A recalls, was a ‘very good person’ who would ‘cover me if I slept’ and ‘give me some of the food his friends had brought him.’ They made a pact to see each other only once if they were ever released and, thereafter, “to forget we had ever met.”

Unlike Cohen, A said he was “only occasionally beaten but not very badly” and interrogations generally took place at night. During his imprisonment A developed a tic that forced him to smack himself on his forehead with his right hand; this would persist for a decade. Things were much worse for Eli Cohen. A remembers hearing Eli screaming and crying every night. “It is painful for me to even remember it.” (“A”)

Several accounts of Eli Cohen's torture state that his interrogators had been taught by the Gestapo. After all, the Syrian Muchabarat had been trained and guided by Alois Brunner, a former SS officer and convicted Nazi war criminal who was held responsible for sending more than 120,000 Austrian, German, French, Slovak, and Greek Jews to their deaths during the

Holocaust. (Katz 171) Brunner had arrived in Syria in 1955, after escaping from Europe to Egypt. The Israelis had known of the Syrians' penchant for torture since the “listening device” incident in 1954. No rational officer in either AMAN or Mossad headquarters expected Eli Cohen to be able to withstand the brutal physical and emotional torture.

Within the Syrian government, there were dramatic tensions regarding what information Eli Cohen would reveal as many feared being implicated themselves. One story, while likely overstating the case, illustrates their worries. The claim is that president Amin El Hafez did care about world opinion and supported a public trial and giving the defendant proper legal defense. El Hafez was supported by a large group of officers posted in the Golan Heights who presented a petition to their headquarters requesting a public trial for the Israeli spy. Opposing them was a large group of high-ranking officials who were well-known for associating with Cohen who realized that a public trial could implicate them. They preferred a quick disposal of him.

As a result, allegedly Eli Cohen suffered alternating sets of torturers – one group wanting to make sure he didn't reveal facts that would cast them in a bad light; another group took their turn, working for the opposite result. **(Note 3)**

Whatever the truth to these stories, it is known the Israeli government hired a noted French lawyer, Jacques Mercier, to defend Elie. The background was explained to him, he was given particulars on the structure of the ruling junta and the possibilities of acquittal. Mercier was assigned to conduct negotiations with two enemy states having no common language between them. (Ben-Hanan 102) Maurice Cohen thought Eli had quickly revealed his true identity to his captors so that he would not be killed as an Arab without true Jewish burial rites, and that he hoped to be tried under the law of the Geneva Convention (M5). This was not to be.

According to Eli Ben-Hanan, Damascus wasn't expecting any attorney for Cohen. “All the bureaus concerned delicately avoided the question of an attorney for Elie Cohen. Amin El-Hafez, the man who could have had the final say, was on convalescent leave. Apart from him, no one was authorized to give the okay.” (Ben-Hanan 102) As events played out, there was never any intention of allowing Mercier to see his client.

According to the complex Syrian rules and regulations, the trial was conducted by the chief justice, who was also the investigator and the prosecutor. “All the others were nothing but that colorful scenery so loved by the East.” (Ben-Hanan 110) On the first day of the trial, the Chief Judge, Colonel Sallah Dali, asked Cohen if he recognized anyone in the row of judges. According to Eli Ben-Hanan, one was Colonel Salim Khatoum, reportedly one of Eli's contacts. Eli claimed he recognized no one. (Ben-Hanan 103) Doubting this answer, the judge attempted to get Cohen to give names of other agents he'd worked with, but Cohen only provided the names of four officers he knew personally – Mukadam Halil Safour, Suleiman al-Rajoula from the Security Service, Adal al-Sa'idi, a retired colonel, and Muhammad Daloul. (Ben-Hanan 104) Again pressured to name his connections, Eli named Mashir Hourri, who had recently died, and Bia Al-Ma'az, a navigator at Damascus airport who was also sitting in the prisoner's dock. (105)

Asked to name what agencies he had penetrated, Cohen listed the Ministry of Information, the broadcasting station, the Central Bank, the Ministry for Municipal Affairs, and the Defense

Ministry. “I also visited El-Hama on the Israeli-Syrian border three times.” (Ben-Hanan 105) The judge seemed especially interested in Cohen’s understanding of religion, and Cohen maintained this was not emphasized in his training. “I would say that I wasn’t an orthodox Moslem, and that I had vague religious memories from my school days.” (Ben-Hanan 109) He said his knowledge of the Koran was limited to five prayers a day, a section from the Koran, and the *Fat ha* of the prayers. (109) The judge found this a suitable point on which to excoriate the prisoner, emphasizing that exploiting religion for spycraft was an especially heinous crime against Islam.

According to Ben-Hanan, the second day was the judge’s opportunity to denounce any newspaper and journalists who had come out with attacks on the Damascus regime and in defense of Elie Cohen. However, most of what occurred on that day was stricken from the public record and is apparently still classified. Meanwhile, Ben-Hanan maintains, the torture of Cohen continued between the sessions at Camp 70 prison which “had broken him down completely.” (112) This was apparent on the third day as television audiences could see changes in the prisoner. When they first saw the trial broadcasts, Eli looked well-dressed, handsome, in a suit and tie. But soon he was in a simple prison uniform and his mother, Sophie Cohen, observed his eyes became like dark coals, his face unrecognizable. (M5) On this day, Cohen gave up Majd Sheikh El-Ard, the merchant who had brought him to the home of ex-Nazi Franz Rademacher. Sheikh El-Ard both maintained he had not helped Cohen and claimed he could have known nothing of Eli’s espionage – after all, why would a mere merchant suspect someone trusted by senior members of the government? (Ben-Hanan 114)

The final session of the special court that reconvened in the afternoon dealt with investigating the part played by Salem Saif, the Radio Damascus announcer who was one of Elie Cohen's friends. Saif was summoned to be questioned and accused of giving Cohen confidential information. Despite intense scrutiny, Saif maintained no classified information came to him, only Ministry of Information transcripts of public speeches. He said his only personal contact with Cohen was asking for the key to his apartment for rendezvous with girls. (Ben-Hanan 118)

After Saif more or less cleared his name, references were made to a second Israeli spy that had apparently been discussed on the second day of the trial. Addressing this concern, the judge read aloud a report from The Lebanese paper *Al Hiyyat*:

In the sensational trial of Elie Cohen, the Israeli spy, it was revealed that an additional Jewish spy is hiding in Syria. It turned out that Cohen received a telegram from Israel containing instructions to search out the whereabouts of the Israeli spy, who it was feared had been arrested. The designation of the man in the telegram from Israel was The Unknown. (Ben-Hanan 120)

Responding to questions about this “unknown,” Cohen reportedly answered, “He's an Israeli spy who operated in Syria and with whom contact has been lost.” (Ben-Hanan 120) He claimed Tel Aviv wanted to know whether this agent was being held in Maza or Tadmor Prison. Cohen admitted he failed in this mission.

Next, the court asked Cohen to discuss his connections with Lieutenant Ma'azi Zaher a-Din. "In June, 1962," Elie began, "I went to Beirut, and from there, via Europe, to Israel. I informed the Center that I had managed to make friends with an officer by the name of Ma'azi Zaher a-Din. They ordered me to tighten my contacts with him . . . When he was appointed area commander of Badlev, I went to visit him, and when he came to Damascus he used to stay with me. Once he noticed an unusual radio antenna at my place. I explained to him that it was an antenna enabling me to pick up Buenos Aires. He nodded and didn't say a word." (Ben-Hanan 121)

Then, Cohen revealed, "I obtained the most important military information when I joined Ma'azi on a tour of the army center at El-Hama. He pointed out the location of important positions, and I passed this information on to Israel. On one of my visits I was invited to his office, where I saw a map of the area of Kuneitra. He showed me where the fortifications were to be built." (121) Under interrogation, Ma'azi admitted Cohen had asked about available land for purchase and showed him what plots were owned by the military. (121) (It is possible Ma'azi was the man described by "A" above.)

In the course of the testimony, it was learned that the head of Syrian Intelligence, Colonel Swidani, was full of admiration for Elie Cohen's work. Swidani told how Elie's home had served as a meeting place for persons of high society and how Elie himself showed considerable knowledge in many fields such as politics, commerce, military life, and social activity. "Trailing Elie Cohen," the colonel told the judge, "was a hard job. The man," he said, pointing to the accused, "acted with great circumspection." (121)

After describing the arrest, the Colonel added: "Beside his bed we found an announcement that had been received by radio from Tel Aviv; in it, Elie was requested to provide more information on a certain member of the government. We carried out a careful search and found recorded tapes that were to be sent to Israel, disappearing ink, fingers of gelatin, Swiss checkbooks, and other equipment for spying." (Ben-Hanan 123)

With this pronouncement, the trial was over, although the verdict had been handed down a week before, but had not yet been published. On May 8, 1965, the announcement was released:

Whereas the evidence and facts that were submitted to this court have persuaded it beyond all shadow of doubt, that the accused Eliyahu Ben Shaul Cohen, alias Kamel Amin Tabet, infiltrated the El'al area, which is a military area to which entry is forbidden, for the purpose of obtaining information liable to be of use to the enemy; And whereas the act of entry into the area is subject *to* the death penalty under Sections 158 and 159 of the Military Tribunal Constitution; And whereas this information is liable to be of assistance to the enemy, it must remain secret for reasons of State security, the one responsible for obtaining such information is sentenced to death under Sections 271, 272, and 234 of the Military Tribunal Constitution.

In the name of the special Tribunal, "*Colonel Sallah Dali*" (Ben-Hanan 124)

Appeals

From the moment the sentence was officially published, the Foreign Office and Israeli embassies abroad mobilized all their connections to get Eli's sentence commuted. Foreign Minister Golda Meir led the campaign, petitioning the international community to force Damascus to seriously consider international opinion. At the same time, Meir Amit labored with passion and frustration to save Cohen. The norms of international espionage dictated that captured spies were imprisoned until eventually swapped. They'd done this with Syria before, as on December 21, 1963, when eleven Israeli prisoners had been exchanged for eighteen Syrians. (Lieber) Some of these had been held for 11 years, and most had been determined to be psychologically damaged and even insane due to the treatment they'd received. Amit had been shaken by the IDF's lack of concern for the fate of the Susannah spies, and he was determined to save this man at all costs. (Katz 169)

Then again, this was Syria. On March 3, 1964, one Lebanese Protestant priest and two Syrians were hanged for spying for Israel. On the next day, April 1, Hanna Abdel Noor el-Mashaal, a Syrian Army signaler, was also executed by firing squad. And, of course, on Feb 23, only the month before, the Attassi pair had been executed with much fanfare. But there was something special about Eli Cohen.

An astonishing number of high-profile figures joined the quest. Pope Paul the Sixth sent a personal note to the Syrian President as did a number of Arab cardinals. The ex-mayor of Florence, Georgio La Fira, appealed personally to the head of the Syrian Revolutionary Council, Amin El-Hafez. Two former French premiers, Antoine Pinay and Edgar Faure, intervened more than once on Elie's behalf. In Paris, scores of senators were mobilized for a propaganda campaign. Elie Cohen's two attorneys – the president of the Barrister's Association, Paul Arrighi, and Jacques Mercier – submitted in the name of Nadia Cohen a request to General de Gaulle to use his influence on General El-Hafez to nullify the decree. (Ben-Hanan 125)

From Belgium, Queen Mother Elisabeth sent her appeal to the head of the Syrian Revolutionary Council. Ex-Premier of Belgium Camille Huysmans expressed readiness to go to Damascus personally to intervene in the matter. Twenty-two British Members of Parliament – including many pro-Arabs – sent a petition for a retrial. In the United States, the heads of the Syrian and Lebanese communities expressed their non-identification with the sentence. Former Canadian Prime Minister John Diefenbaker joined leaders from Scandinavian and Benelux countries, members of Parliament, journalists, scientists, and men of letters, as well as various organizations such as the International Red Cross, the League for the Protection of Human Rights, and the International Association of Jurists. (Ben-Hanan 126)

On March 8, a week after the broadcast of the trial had begun, the Swedish branch of Amnesty International sent a telegram to the President of Syria requesting clemency for Elie Cohen. The cable read:

Cohen is not a Syrian citizen. And in civilized countries foreign espionage agents are not executed. There has not been one case where Syrian spies convicted in Israel were executed. (Ben-Hanan 126)

On March 27, the Foreign Minister of Argentina, Dr. Miguel Angel Zabala Ortez, announced that he had appealed to the Syrian government to reprieve the sentence of Elie Cohen, who was a citizen of Argentina. His request was submitted for humanitarian reasons, and in view of the fact that Argentina did not have the death penalty. At the same time, Dr. Ortez revealed that an additional request for clemency had been submitted – for a woman citizen of Argentina who had been sentenced to death in Damascus on charges of espionage on behalf of Israel. The Argentine Foreign Minister refused to divulge her name or whether she was one of those who had been tried with Elie Cohen. Another Argentinean, Cardinal Pelcius, from his death-bed formulated his request to General Amin El-Hafez, in which he stated explicitly this was part of his last will and testament.

At the same time, Israel's Military intelligence proposed kidnapping Syrian notables as a bargaining chip. It was suggested that ransom money be transferred to the Syrians through the French, and that commandos be sent in to free him. Israel was even prepared to give the Syrians intelligence on internal Syrian matters, such as details of the plans of the regime's opponents to overthrow the president. (Florsheim and Shilon) Meanwhile, Jacques Mercier, Cohen's attorney, appealed to representatives of every Damascus ministry. He managed to get a short interview with Colonel Swidani, head of Syrian Intelligence. He brought with him Israel's offer to release ten Syrian spies. The Syrian president found the offer insufficient. Mercier then offered medical aid, spare auto parts and jeeps, and military supplies. Reportedly, all this was rejected because, in part, such a negotiation would act as a recognition of the state of Israel. (Ben-Hanan 126)

Finally, Mercier was granted an audience with the Chief Judge. According to Eli Ben-Hanan, he gave the attorney the reasoning for the execution of Eli Cohen:

The big mistake of the country that sent you is that it's capable of mobilizing world opinion in this matter. This would undermine the regime's ego – an ego that must *not* lose face in the eyes of the electors. It must be independent and free of external influence. The Elie Cohen affair has grown to the point that the top leadership is uneasy. I am very doubtful if all Israel's efforts will manage to gain him clemency. (132-133)

Of course, no audience watched the unfolding drama more closely than the Cohen family. At the top of Hatehiya Street in Bat-Yam, Nadia Cohen, Eli's mother Sophie, and Avraham Cohen watched the television broadcast and listened to the angry and triumphant radio descriptions. At the time, there was no television network in Israel, as David Ben-Gurion believed the technology would erode Israeli culture. So after Eli was captured, Avraham Cohen says, "Mossad brought us a television. Not like the ones you have today. It was a small screen in a large wooden box. Reception was bad. It had snow in the picture like an old movie." And antennae was installed on the top of the building. "I went up myself to fix it, to move it to catch the signals."

During the trial, “My mother didn't sleep. She was all the time listening to a small transistor radio. On television there were breaks in the trial, things they didn't show us.” (A4) Maurice said he saw the “tranquil appearance and placid face look of Eli Cohen as shown in the selected re-transmission” from Syria. He observed twitches in his brother’s face which he attributed to electrodes used in the torture. (M1) Avraham added, “On the radio, you could hear everything. My mother probably knew more about what was going on than Mossad. It was Purim when they announced Eli's fate. My brother Ephriam knew where the Mossad offices were and we went. When we got there they were all wearing masks and having a party. They said ‘life must go on.’” (A4)

The Execution

Of all the days in the life of Eli Cohen, the events of his last hours are the least mysterious. The leaders of Syria, in fact, went to great lengths to make every moment as public as possible.

Shortly after midnight on May 18, 1965, a police armored car, escorted by an army truckload of armed soldiers, arrived at Maza Prison in Damascus. After collecting Eli Cohen, he was taken to the police station near Al-Marjha Square, in the center of the city. In a closed cell, Elie was allowed to write a letter to his wife. One account has it that, a few days before, Eli was forced under torture to write in Arabic language a letter defaming Israel “and his activators requesting his family, brothers and sisters to leave the rotten, discriminating country and to immigrate abroad.” (M1)

A few hours before his death, capitalizing on the presence of Red Cross officials, foreign press representatives, 90-year-old Rabbi Nessim Andebo was summoned to undertake the customary confession prayer ceremony. After Cohen demanded the opportunity to write a letter without the pressures of his captors, a decision was taken that Eli could write two letters, one in Arabic and the other in French. Possibly, these choices were made as the Syrians would prefer Arabic, and French, Nadia’s mother tongue, to satisfy the Red Cross officials. He would not have been allowed to use Hebrew. (M1)

The original Arabic letter appeared in Arab newspapers but quickly disappeared. The other two were delivered to Eli’s mother by the Red Cross. She kept them to her dying day.

To My Dear Wife Nadia, and My Dear Parent,

I am writing to you these last words, a few minutes before my end, and I would like to beg you to be in a good relationship forever.

I request you dear Nadia to pardon me and take care of yourself and our children. Look after them thoroughly, bring them up and give them a complete education, don't deprive them or yourself of any thing.

Please be always in close communication with my dear Parent.

You can get remarried in order not to deprive the children of a father. You have the full liberty to do so. I am begging you my dear Nadia not to spend your time in weeping about some thing already passed.

Concentrate on yourself, looking forward for a better future!

I am sending my last kisses to you and to the children: Sophie, Irit, and Shaoul, also to all my family, especially to my mother, my sister, Odette and her family, Maurice and his family, Ezra and his family, Sara and her family, Zion and his family, Alfred (Efrayim) and his family and at the end to Bero (Abraham).

Don't forget also your dear family; give them my best regards.

Don't forget to pray for the soul of my late Father and of mine.

Receive all of you my last kisses and blessing.

Eli Cohen 15/5/1965

Then, the Chief Rabbi of Damascus, Rabbi Nissim Andabu, was permitted to be alone with the condemned man for twenty minutes. Later, he reported Cohen's last words were "Tell my wife I fully discharged my duty." ("PM Speech")

Eli Cohen was dressed in a bright white gown inscribed in black chalk:

ELIE COHEN CONDEMNED TO DIE BY HANGING

In the crowd of 10,000 Syrians, slogans and shouts mingled in the darkness as searchlights came on. The execution ceremony was to be covered live from beginning to end by the Syrian TV network, even broadcast in Israel. That evening, Avraham recalls that he, his mother, and Nadia and her children gathered in Eli's apartment. The other brothers, who all lived nearby, arrived later that morning. In Maurice Cohen's words, "The mother, the brothers and sisters, his young pretty wife could view the terrible and shocking spectacle with great pains and sorrow. Except the tragic death, it could be a theatrical performance scene." (M1)

In Eli Ben-Hanan's description of the scene, an agonized Nadia Cohen "pounded the radio in front of her. Her fists smashed the glass and hurled the radio to the ground. Then, with a hysterical scream, she rushed at the windows and smashed all the window panes one after the other." (Ben-Hanan 137) (**Note 4**)

Eli's brothers rushed over and vainly tried to hold her. "Why did they send my Elie?" Sophie Cohen cried. "Why did my son have to die among the Arabs?" Nadia burst over to the TV set and twisted the dial until the screen filled with the view of Al-Marjha Square. "You mustn't look at that," one of the brothers whispered grimly. "I must!" she cried. "Leave me alone! I must!" (Ben-Hanan 135)

At three thirty-five a.m., Damascus time, Elie was led out and brought to the scaffold under heavy guard. The rows of soldiers parted to let him through. On the scaffold, Elie recited the Vidui, the Hebrew prayer of a man about to face death: "Almighty God, forgive me for all my sins and transgressions." (Thomas *Gideon* 63) The chief executioner of Damascus, Abu-Saliman, placed the noose around Cohen's neck and waited for the signal. Then, the base was removed from under Elie's feet and his body dangled at the end of the rope. A white parchment filled with Anti-Zionist writing was put on his body, and he was left hanging for six hours (Geller).

Notes

1 – Family: David B. Tinin and Dag Christiansen’s 1976 *The Hit Team*, describing the assassination operations of the Mossad after the 1972 Munich attack by Black September, offers insights into the psychological costs for secret agents. For example, they note that false identities allow agents to commit acts in that name which distances the actions from the individual. However, guilt can grow later. Further, they explore why failures occur when agents are in the field too long, which is why five years is considered the maximum time an agent can be undercover and why their compensation should be high, their lives after secret work usually difficult in the civilian sector.

2 – Atassi: Nureddin al-Atassi became the “Head of State” for Syria on February 25, 1966 and served until November 18, 1970. According to Hani Yarid, one story was that it was these two Americans who had been caught spying in Syria and who had been in contact with Cohen, who revealed his identity under torture. (Yarid)

3 – torture: The unknown source for this story was found in Maurice Cohen’s notes.

4 – glass breaking: Avraham says he doesn’t remember any of the glass breaking described here.

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Maurice Cohen Manuscripts and Tapes

M1. “Reminiscences: Maurice Cohen's Reminiscences on his brother Eliahu Cohen, Most Famous Spy.” A 47-page collection of notes written by Maurice with material gathered from unknown sources, apparently between 1998-2001.

M2. Cohen, Maurice as told to Carla Stockton. “Am I My Brother’s Keeper?” Retrieved, June 5, 2007.
www.Spywise.net

M3. From conversations between Helene Fragman Abramson and Maurice Cohen throughout 2006.

M4. Discussions with Maurice Cohen, Harvey Chertok, and Wes Britton in the home of Helene Fragman Abramson, Oct. 8-9, 2006

M5. Television interview. ??

Interviews with Avraham Cohen

A1. Avraham Cohen interview with Helene Fragman Abramson, Tel Aviv, November 15, 2006.

A2. Avraham Cohen interview with Helene Fragman Abramson, May 2007.

A3. Avraham Cohen phone interview with Helene Fragman Abramson, July 31, 2007

A4. Avraham Cohen telephone interview with Wes Britton and Helene Fragman Abramson, Aug. 2, 2007.

Other Interviews

“A.” Unrecorded interview with Helene Fragman Abramson, Monday evening, October 23, 2006.
