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Israel lets out a few secrets to honor fallen spies

By Jonathan Broder
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RAMAT HASHARON, Israel—After 37 years, Israel's fallen spies finally have come in from the cold.

Their names, 360 of them, are engraved on the walls of the Jewish state's first memorial to its legendary intelligence agencies. Until now, many of Israel's secret agents lived and died in the anonymity that their murky profession demands. Others went to their graves in enemy territory under fake Arab identities.

The Center for Special Studies in the Memory of the Fallen of Israel's Intelligence Community, the title of the recently opened memorial, chronicles the fierce Arab-Israeli spy war that has raged quietly across the globe in the shadow of the Middle East conflict.

Some names on the walls are exposed as spies for the first time. Others died in circumstances so mysterious that the directors of the memorial, former agents themselves, are reluctant to give details about their lives. Still others have pasts so secret they cannot be listed at all.

The center was built after years of campaigning by relatives of intelligence agents to erect a monument to their deceased loved ones, said Yeshayahu Daliot, a former senior intelligence officer who is director of the memorial.

"We in the intelligence community vetoed the idea of a memorial for security reasons," he said. "But then we finally said, 'Why not, for God's sake? They sacrificed their lives. Why not make something for them?'"

The list of people involved in the project reads like a "Who's Who" of Israel's intelligence community. Among them are Meir Amit, Zvi Zamir and Yitzhak Hafi, former chiefs of Mossad, Israel's international intelligence agency; and former military intelligence chief Aharon Yariv.

Working as volunteers, they collected \$2 million from Jews worldwide to finance the memorial, built on an acre site in a stand of eucalyptus trees in Ramat Hasharon, a suburb of Tel Aviv.

Surrounded by a library, an auditorium and an amphitheater, the center of the memorial consists of a labyrinth of sandstone walls divided into five shaded alcoves, each representing a period in the history of Israel's intelligence operations. The names of the spies who died in each period are etched into the stone walls. No ranks or agency affiliations are mentioned.

"The maze symbolizes the indirect path and the complexity of intelligence methods," Daliot said. "We work in the shadows. The names and dates of death are enough. Even here, we operate on a need-to-know basis."

Showing the way through the labyrinth, Daliot paused in the second alcove, which commemorates the period between 1949 and 1957, to point out the name of Jacob Bokai, the first agent to die after the birth of the state.

In May, 1949, Daliot recounted, Bokai, a Syrian-born Jew, was ordered by Israeli intelligence to assume the identity of a Palestinian refugee named Najib Ibrahim Hamuda and to enter Jordan. To help establish his credentials, he lived in a Palestinian refugee camp in Jaffa and later went to an Israeli prison; where he was occasionally beaten by his Jewish guards.

But crossing into Jordan with a stream of other refugees at Jerusalem's Mandelbaum Gate, Bokai was arrested as being a Palestinian suspected of spying for the Israelis. Despite hours of interrogation and torture, he never revealed his identity. On Aug. 3, 1949, the Palestinian named Hamuda was executed for spying and buried in Jordan under the same name.

The same alcove also contains the names of three spies who died because of one of Israel's worst security mishaps.

In 1954, Egyptian intelligence rounded up an Israeli spy ring that was setting off bombs in Cairo in hopes of undermining the regime of President Gamal Abdel Nasser. Agents Moshe Marzouk and Shmuel Azar were executed; the third spy, Meir Binet, committed

suicide in prison. The incident, known here as the "Lavon Affair" after Defense Minister Pinhas Lavon, rocked the Israeli establishment and brought down the government of Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion.

The next alcove, covering 1957 to 1968, contains the name of Eli Cohen, perhaps the most famous of Israeli spies. Known here as "Our man in Damascus," the Iraqi-born Cohen posed as a wealthy emigre named Kamil Amin Taabes and penetrated so high into the top echelons of the Syrian elite that he was considered a candidate for defense minister.

But he was caught when the Syrian secret service, using sophisticated Soviet homing devices, traced clandestine transmissions between Mossad headquarters and Cohen's apartment in Damascus. He was publicly hanged on May 18, 1965. Israel's capture of the Golan Heights in the 1967 war was largely facilitated by Cohen's information.

There also is the name of Shalom Dani, who died of a heart attack on May 21, 1968. Dani was the master forger for Israeli intelligence and was responsible for all the forged documents used in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in the Mossad's 1960 capture of Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann, Daliot said.

Still another name is that of Ze'ev Bar Levi, a cancer victim. As the intelligence community's best analyst on Jordan, Bar Levi, nicknamed "Biber," was credited with saving King Hussein's life in the 1960s when he advised against bombing a concentration of senior Jordanian staff officers near the border, Daliot said.

"Biber knew that if all that brass was around, the king was there, too," Daliot said.

The memorial contains a few surprises. One alcove lists the name of Yaacov Bar-Simantov, an Israeli diplomat who was shot to death outside his Paris home on April 3, 1982. Until the memorial was built, he never had been confirmed as an intelligence officer.

There also is the name of Yonathan Netanyahu, one of the top officers in the rescue from Entebbe on July 4, 1976, and the only Israeli soldier to die in that mission to rescue Israeli hostages being held in Uganda. "He was a fighter, but he was also one of ours," Daliot said.

The maze has one wall that is blank.

"We don't want to use it, but we know what will be," Daliot said. "Believe me, we will use it."