

Hesh Kestin on a Missed Flight That Saved His Life

HESH KESTIN MAY 15, 2014

WHEN I WAS the senior European correspondent for Forbes magazine, I traveled a good deal, often to Africa and the Middle East—dismally exciting places where a journalist's life was worth little more than what it had cost New Scotland Yard to print my press card. The black-and-white photo on it showed a young man of addled cockiness; only shades and a dangling cigarette were missing. I was young, stupid and intent on making my reputation, mostly in bad neighborhoods.



But the day after Christmas in 1985, I expected only exhaustion, not the usual peril, after flying from London to Paris, then Zurich and finally to Vienna to interview sources for a simple financial story. It involved no

Libyan-backed terrorists, no drug-fueled Congolese child soldiers, no Lebanese warlords. This story's interviewees did not threaten. They invested.

And, in Vienna, they drank. Dining with a trio of strangely unbuttoned Austrian merchant bankers, who up until that evening had been complete strangers, I found myself invited to a rather raucous house party. I recall zip—other than that no gunshots were fired. Properly soused, I tucked in at the very civilized Hotel Sacher at 5 a.m., only to be awakened an hour later by a cheerful desk clerk.

"Herr Kestin," he chirped into the phone. "You must to rise for your flight."

Ah, yes. Still half-drunk and at the same time somehow hung over, I managed to locate the lobby, where I was informed that the cab I had ordered the night before hadn't shown up and that another might take a half-hour to arrive. The desk clerk suggested a short walk past St. Stephen's Cathedral to the Hilton, where I could catch the airport bus.

Vienna that morning was gay with Christmas decorations. The weather was very sunny and very cold, and by the time I passed St. Stephen's I was a good way to sobriety, though still very hung over. And there it was: a cafe, just opening, before which stood a steel table and a single chair that together composed a frozen landscape of invitation. What the hell: One beer might allay the pain. And I'd still have time to catch the bus.

Ordering the second bottle, I knew I would miss not only the bus but my flight. Still, I did feel better. The hangover was all but gone when the bus from the Hilton finally got me to [Flughafen Wien](#) at Schwechat.

I arrived just in time to watch the maintenance staff dealing with the last shards of bloodied glass. Palestinian terrorists had chosen that morning to

attack the El Al counter with automatic weapons and grenades, and by way of sloppiness also shot up people waiting at the adjacent British Airways counter for my London flight. The same group would claim responsibility for a simultaneous attack at Fiumicino Airport in Rome. The toll that morning was horrific: 19 passengers cut down, 138 injured.

And none of them was me.

At home that night in the very placid, staid and orderly neighborhood of Holland Park, my wife and I shared a bottle of Champagne. We were both aware that I had come even closer to death than during the Lebanon War, in which I had been an Israeli combatant before returning to Beirut, even more recklessly, as a correspondent.

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Later that week, I was visited in my office by two civil servants identifying themselves only as Dougie and Alistair. Alistair did not say a word; he was apparently there to operate the somewhat noisy tape recorder in his pocket. Dougie asked the questions. MI6 was "rather curious" about the only London-bound passenger who had been a no-show that morning in Vienna. What did I know, when and how did I know it, and what connections did I have to the Mossad, the CIA, the PLO and/or the IRA? As if in indictment, Dougie pulled from his briefcase a file full of "remarkably sourced and suspiciously detailed" articles I had perpetrated.

My explanation for what hadn't happened in Vienna brought a mild British smile to Dougie's lips—his eyes were unaffected. Alistair's expression remained blank.

"Mr. Kestin," Dougie told me on their way out, "do please be aware that Her Majesty's government intends for the foreseeable future to continue close observation of your activities in the United Kingdom."

For years I was not able to fly out of Heathrow without surrendering the contents of my briefcase for someone to examine, and probably photograph, in a back room. Often the same drill would be carried out at my destination, especially in France. From time to time on my reportorial peregrinations, I became aware of having grown a tail. In Nicosia, Cyprus, I finally offered to buy drinks for the two inept gumshoes who had tracked me all day. They accepted, grinning.

I, too, had much to grin about. At the cost of two beers I had lost a good deal of cockiness, and gained 28 years of life—and counting.

Corrections & Amplifications

Mr. Kestin missed a British Airways flight from Vienna to London on Dec. 27, 1985. An earlier version of this article incorrectly said he had been booked on a British Overseas Airways Corporations flight.

—Mr. Kestin's latest novel, "The Lie," was published in March.

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