

Case: Israel, 1960s.

For twelve-year-old Motti, the world is full of mysteries to be solved and his town is crammed with spies to be tracked. When he and his best friend Reuven identify a suspicious elderly man in the neighborhood as a potential German spy, they set out to unmask him, setting off a series of adventures, investigations, near-misses and the repeated appearance of a green dress.

In the process, Motti uncovers some secrets closer to home: what does his mother hide away in her drawer? Why did she have to go on a trip to Germany?

And what exactly is she refusing to say about her past?



www.pjourway.org

The Lost Spy and the Green Dress

Alex Paz-Goldman

Translated by Linda Yechiel





First published in 2022 by Green Bean Books,
c/o Pen & Sword Books Ltd,
47 Church Street, Barnsley, S. Yorkshire, S70 2AS
www.greenbeanbooks.com

© Alex Paz-Goldman 2021
Translation © Linda Yechiel, 2021

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the publisher. Any person who does any unauthorized act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

PJ Our Way edition: 978-1-78438-735-8
Green Bean Books edition: 978-1-78438-731-0

Library of Congress Cataloging-in Publication Data available

Typeset by JCS Publishing Services Ltd, www.jcs-publishing.co.uk
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK), Croydon, CR0 4YY

Purim gift [’poō rim gift] n. expression

An old Israeli custom, similar to “trick or treat,” now obsolete. The collection of coins or bills (with a preference for large-denomination bills) popular in the first years of the State of Israel with children who were interested in accumulating cash. When the Festival of Purim approached (Book of Esther, 9:15), the children would dress in costume, go to the homes of unsuspecting residents, knock loudly on the doors, extend their open hands and loudly yell: “Purim gift! Purim gift!”

Residents who hadn’t taken the precaution of being out, and who were tempted to open their doors, were forced to fill the children’s greedy palms with cash to avoid a shower of insults, the foremost being the comparison of the person to the evil Haman or his descendants. Those who tried to satisfy the children by instead offering treats such as Purim *hamantaschen* cookies or candy also faced a sorry fate: they were branded “stingy” and their children were excluded from all the neighborhood soccer games.

Historians and archeologists are divided in opinion regarding the origin of this custom, but they all agree that it did not survive beyond the incident of “The Lost Spy and the Green Dress.”

Chapter 1

I clearly remember the first time I heard there were spies in our neighborhood. It was 1964, and I was twelve. We lived in Ramat Amidar, a very poor suburb east of Ramat Gan. My mother was hunched over her sewing machine, wearing a flowered dress, but the flowers on it looked as if they hadn't been watered in a long time. Her sewing machine stood in the living room, which also happened to be our kitchen and our dining room. Every evening, Mom sat in front of it, mending our neighbors' dresses or patching my clothes. Her glasses would be perched at the end of her nose, and when she needed to thread the needle, she called me to help. I would spit on the end of the strand, deftly thread it through the eye of the needle, and then proudly show it to her. I was forbidden to touch the machine. Mom always locked it carefully and kept the key in her purse. Once I heard her say that a similar sewing machine had saved her life in the "camp." She never went into more detail, but I imagined to myself that she had sewn a magic dress for herself in which she floated away to another place.

She manipulated the black wheel with her weak right hand while her left foot pumped the ornate metal pedal up and down. Mom's eyes followed the tiny needle as it quickly and relentlessly pierced the fabric, and her slight body moved forward and backward like someone swaying in devoted

prayer in front of the holy ark of a synagogue. Both Dad and Mom had grown up in very religious homes and had often gone to “*shul*”—as they called a synagogue—when they were young. The praying-type motion should have looked quite natural, except that both my parents insisted that they still had a score to settle with God, and they refused to have anything to do with Him.

“Listen to this!” Dad read excitedly from the newspaper:

Man in Suitcase Well-Known to Israeli Police

Mordechai Luke, the felon who deserted his pregnant wife and three children and moved to the Gaza Strip, is none other than Joseph Dahan—the man whom Egypt tried to smuggle into Cairo in a diplomatic suitcase.

Since returning from the “convalescent home,” as Mom called it, my father hardly ever left the house. He just spent all day sitting at the large table, reading the newspaper and chain-smoking. If Mom or I were around, he would fire off a salvo of headlines at us. It drove Mom crazy. But not me.

Dad’s face was hidden behind the large, shadowy pages of the evening edition of the newspaper. I brought him the paper every day, from Zehavi’s little grocery store. Today, as usual, I had asked for half a loaf of the simplest cheap “black” bread and a newspaper, asking Zehavi to add them to our account. I always watched anxiously as he cut the loaf of dark bread exactly into two perfectly equal halves. The stump of his left arm held the bread close to his chest, and his right hand quickly sliced through the

loaf with a black-handled serrated knife. Every time, he stopped just the instant before—I was sure—he would cut right through his stained, white apron into his chest. The two halves of bread were precisely alike, down to the last crumb. Just like Dad and Uncle Fischel.

“Fischel claims this is about a double agent,” said Dad, and I imagined a secret agent with a twin brother, like in *Lottie and Lisa*, or a double, like in *The Prince and the Pauper*.

Mom dismissed my father’s words with, “So what if Fischel thinks that?”

“Fischel says ...,” Dad tried to continue relating what my only uncle had said.

“Fischel ... Fischel ... Fischel ... It’s always what Fischel says. What about you? You don’t have your own opinion?” My mother didn’t like Uncle Fischel, Dad’s identical twin. He was a mere five minutes older than Dad but treated my father as if he was a hopeless kid brother. Mom didn’t have any brothers or sisters anymore, so sometimes when she mocked Uncle Fischel, I thought it was because she was jealous of Dad, who still has one living brother, while she has only me to remind her of the brother she loved so much.

“In fact, I do have my own opinion,” retorted Dad, defending himself from behind the open newspaper. There was a long pause, and then he muttered weakly, “In my opinion, Fischel is right.”

Mom didn’t bat an eyelid, but I was really excited. I had heard about the man in the suitcase. My best friend Reuven and I had talked about him just the day before.

“Do you understand what happened here?” Reuven’s words echoed in my mind. Reuven loved to explain the

The Lost Spy & the Green Dress

stories in the newspaper to me. “The Egyptians captured this Jew and tried to send him from Italy to Egypt in a suitcase. They probably would have tortured him and hanged him just because he was a Jew.”

“Now everything is crystal clear,” exclaimed Dad. “He went to the Egyptians to tell them that he was willing to spy against us, but in fact, we had sent him and he was a double agent.” He paused for an instant and then continued speaking to himself. But I heard him clearly: “Exactly what Fischel thought,” he said. To my father, Fischel was the epitome of wisdom.

“What’s a double agent?” I asked.

“It’s someone who presents himself as a traitor and offers to spy against his own country, but he is really there to pass false information to his contacts in the other country. Usually, though, he ends up being some two-faced character who isn’t loyal to anyone. He just takes money from both sides and cheats everyone,” explained Dad, happy that someone was finally listening to him.

“Yoin’eh! Really! Stop filling the child’s head with nonsense. He’s got homework to do,” said Mom from behind her sewing machine. My father’s name is Yonah, the Hebrew name for Jonah the prophet. I was ashamed of his old-fashioned biblical name, so I told my friends that Yoin’eh was actually my mother’s pet name for Yonatan, a fine, modern Israeli name. This wasn’t the only thing that embarrassed me about my father. I was also ashamed of his weak, fragile appearance. He was short and scrawny, and his blue work clothes hung on him as if they were on a hanger. I was embarrassed by his nonstop chatter too. But more than

The Lost Spy & the Green Dress

anything, I was ashamed that he never did reserve army duty. He never came home wearing a military uniform and bearing a rifle like Reuven's father did. I felt I had no choice but to invent a "new, improved" biography for him where he started out as a bold partisan rebel in the forests of Poland and continued as a daring fighter in a special classified unit in the Israeli Army, where secrecy was mandatory. This was also a good way to explain why he had disappeared for six months, when he had actually been at the convalescent home.

Dad peeked out for a moment from behind the newspaper. His gray-blue eyes, usually dull and apathetic since his return home, were now sparkling beneath his silver hair. He looked straight into my eyes. "Spies are crawling everywhere. They send them here and plant them among us," he whispered.

"And just who are 'they'?" asked Mom. She could obviously hear Dad's whispers. She stretched out the word "they" as if it was a bubble of gum that swelled at the "th" and exploded at the "ey."

"Our enemies, of course! Those who want to destroy us, who want to continue the Nazis—may their names be blotted out forever—mission. They're inundating us with spies." I could see that Dad was really agitated. With a trembling hand, he groped for his yellow pack of Ascot cigarettes, pulled out a wrinkled cigarette, jammed it between his lips, and began puffing out smoke rings one after another. Nobody could make smoke rings like Dad. He could blow one ring inside another. That was his way of calming himself down.

Dad was so excited that I was afraid he was going to collapse, just as he had before he went to the convalescent

The Lost Spy & the Green Dress

home. I remember coming in from school, surprised to see him at home. He never came home from work at such an hour. He was sitting hunched over the huge table, his elbows on it, his head between his hands, and his body shuddering as he cried. Smoke was curling up from an ashtray brimming over with squashed, yellow cigarette butts. I wanted to run to him, but Mom wouldn't let me. She told me that everything would be okay, and that Dad just needed to be allowed to rest. I had stood in the corner, trembling and crying, but my father didn't even look at me. Before this, he had always come to me if I ever even whimpered.

Then Uncle Fischel arrived. They say that identical twins sense each other's feelings even from thousands of kilometers away, and Fischel always showed up at our house right at the most difficult moments. He hugged and kissed me and told me to be strong. His whiskers tickled, and I clutched him as hard as I could. Then Fischel and Mom whispered together.

From the bits and pieces I overheard, I gathered that Dad had been fired from the factory where he worked three months earlier, but he hadn't told anybody about it and had continued leaving the house and coming home as usual until he couldn't keep up the charade and broke down. Fischel took Dad away. He didn't even say goodbye to me. The next day Mom said he was in a convalescent home and we would soon go to visit.

"A flood of spies for sure! Everyone is always after you," scorned Mom. She kept her eyes glued to the sewing machine, as her right hand turned the wheel and her left hand guided green fabric under the needle.

The Lost Spy & the Green Dress

“Do you think there are spies in our neighborhood too?” I asked in a trembling voice. I was a little worried but very excited.

“In our neighborhood too!” Dad summed up behind his curtain of smoke.