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Elie Geisler, 'The Israeli Nuclear Drama of May 1967: A Personal Testimony'

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Summary:

Elie Geisler received training as a radiation-safety officer while serving as a soldier at Dimona from 1964 to 1966. As the crisis escalated in late May 1967, Geisler was summoned to meet the head of the Minhal Madaii—the secret scientific administration in charge of the nuclear project—who gave him a special assignment: guarding a radioactive “package” to be placed under heavy security. The following testimony was relayed to Avner Cohen through several interviews and follow-up conversations and email exchanges.

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I was born in Jerusalem in June 1942.^[1] Like most citizens of Israel, I was required to undertake mandatory military service. In November 1963, at age twenty-one—a little older than my peers due to personal circumstances—I was drafted into the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). After basic military training, I was assigned to Unit 1050, a top-secret military unit (we were all in plain clothes) that provided certain kinds of workers—primarily “operators” and “radiation inspectors”—to the Negev Nuclear Research Center (KAMAG). The recruits of Unit 1050 were talented young men—soldiers with high psychometric scores—who could be rapidly trained to perform technical jobs at KAMAG at low cost for nearly two and a half years.

At KAMAG, as a young soldier, I received special training as a radiation safety officer before I served in that role at Machon 2 (“Institute 2”). From the outside, it looks like an unassuming one-floor building. It has the appearance of a large warehouse or a Walmart store. The official designation of this building (and so the American inspectors were told in the 1960) was “administrative and maintenance offices.” But the modest appearance of the building was only the upper and visible portion of what was actually a huge site. Like the “tip of the iceberg,” the building was an entrance to a multilevel subterranean reprocessing facility over 210 feet in depth for the nuclear fuel consumed in the nearby heavy-water reactor. In that building, the State of Israel extracted plutonium for the cores of nuclear weapons. Institute Number 2 was a hidden web of production and research labs.

This was my first exposure to Israel’s nuclear-weapon program, but not my last. I served in the nuclear program until September 1973. Initially, I was there as part of my military service at Unit 1050, and from 1967 onward, I was employed as a civil servant.

By the spring of 1966, the Israeli government had overhauled the entire organizational structure of the nuclear bureaucracy. Prime Minister Levi Eshkol, who was also the minister of defense, announced the re-establishment of the dormant Israeli Atomic Energy Commission (IAEC) as the executive agency in charge of all national nuclear activity. In parallel, however, he secretly created a new and highly classified organizational entity called the *Minhal Madaii* (in Hebrew, Scientific Authority) to serve as the central executive headquarters of two separate hubs of the weapons-project activities—KAMAG and certain units from Israel’s Weapons Development Authority (RAFAEL), as well as some other smaller research-and-development units. This reorganization was an overdue necessity, as both KAMAG and RAFAEL had major communication problems.

This reorganization of the nuclear project meant effectively creating a new governance architecture based on a two-tier structure, one public and one classified. The public knew only that IAEC was reorganized and placed under the prime minister as its chairman, though it knew nothing about the second tier, the *Minhal*, the new entity that was in charge of the nation’s weapons program. Professor Israel Dostrovsky of the Weizmann Institute was publicly appointed as the director-general of the reorganized IAEC. He was also appointed head of the classified *Minhal Madaii*, reporting to Eshkol’s deputy at the Ministry of Defense, Zvi Dinstein. By 1967, several employees of the IAEC had “two hats,” meaning they were also assigned to the *Minhal*, and both organizations were housed in the same building in Ramat Aviv. This was an odd bureaucratic arrangement, to say the least. The IAEC building also housed, on the first floor, the Israel Institute of Petroleum and Energy, whereas the second and the third floors were occupied by the Commission and the *Minhal*.

After my mandatory military service ended in mid-1966, I continued to work full time for some time as a civilian employee at Dimona (on some administrative arrangement with 1050). I did so to fund my university studies. In 1967, I was studying for a bachelor’s degree in political science at Tel Aviv University in Ramat Aviv, while also studying history and philosophy at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. I spent much of my time on *Eged* buses, going back and forth between Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and my home in Beersheva.^[2]

By early-mid 1967, I was about to change assignments and move to the *Minhal* headquarters at Ramat Aviv as an assistant to Dr. Elkana (“Kuni”) Halevi, who was serving as scientific adviser to

the *Minhal* head, Professor Israel Dostrovsky. Dr. Halevi was a true scholar and a gentleman, and a physicist at heart. He graduated with a BSc and a PhD in physics from University of California, Berkeley. He was hired into the IAEC directly from his studies at Berkeley. He had little experience or knowledge in management and administration, and he relied on me and others in the IAEC for additional knowledge and advice in the managerial sciences. His job was to serve as an assistant to the director general in matters of economics, organization, and management. On the economics side, he hired an economist, and I was hired to help on organizational issues.

I do not recall how exactly I met Kuni, but he liked me and wanted to hire me. I recall it took him quite a while to create a real job for me. I think it was formally done only in 1969, when I moved permanently to the *Minhal*. Until then, Kuni arranged all sorts of projects for me at the *Minhal* and also at some of its top-secret facilities.

During the early days of the May 1967 crisis, while I was in between assignments, I was formally mobilized as a reservist and spent my time both at the *Minhal* offices in Ramat Aviv and at the military headquarters at the *Kiryat*, the IDF headquarters in Tel Aviv. On Sunday, May 28, something of significance happened. Kuni escorted me to Dostrovsky's office. I was told I was selected to be involved in a special assignment, and for that assignment I had to be formally and quickly commissioned as an IDF officer. In addition to the written orders, I also received on the spot, via a formal letter of appointment, the representative rank of lieutenant.

My task was to assume control, on Dostrovsky's behalf, of a secure installation located some forty kilometers south of Tel Aviv. The installation was an old Tegart police compound, built during the British Mandate in the vicinity of the town of Gedera. It was built like a fortress, with a wall surrounding the installation and a heavy metal double gate as the only way in or out. Between the gate and the building, there was a large yard, roughly the size of half a soccer field.

I arrived there jointly with Dostrovsky, Kuni, and a few others in a company of a "package," a wooden crate about 40 cubic feet in volume. We deposited the crate in one of the rooms inside the main building. The room was empty of any furniture and without windows. I proceeded to open the crate and uncover a metal container with a removable top. Using both alpha and gamma detection instruments, I measured the levels of radiation in the room, and on the surface of the "package." I noted the readings in a log book.

Just before dark, Dostrovsky and his entourage left the compound just as a platoon (about twenty-eight men) of police border guards in full gear arrived to guard the facility, with a veteran officer in command (someone in his fifties). Along with them, they brought a mobile kitchen unit, as well as a load of military-issue chairs, desks, etc. They were under my overall command, which explained why I was hastily commissioned as an IDF lieutenant earlier. They were armed with their personal weapons and four heavy machine guns, which we immediately deployed on the guard towers of the building.

The commander of the border guard platoon and I sat down on the large veranda at the entrance to the main building and discussed the security issues involved: i.e., placing the guards, securing the inner perimeter with the package, and the daily routine of the guard platoon. We posted guards at the primary and massive gate, some 50 yards from the building. I ordered barbed wire to be installed along the top of the brick wall surrounding the facility. We also positioned the two large trucks that had brought the guards next to the gate, thus barricading the compound. We also established a telephone line hook-up and tested the electrical connections to make sure that the compound would be lit before dark.

My job, as Dostrovsky instructed me, and as was specified in the written order, was to be in charge of the facility on behalf of the *Minhal's* director—as I understood it, the *Minhal* had full responsibility for the facility—and to monitor the "package." The package was the heart of the matter: it contained a metallic half-sphere. I was told that one or two other cores were placed (and possibly assembled) in other locations, and that a few were "duds" or decoys, masquerading as the genuine

article. (Later, I was told that two to three cores had been produced by this time. Based on my own knowledge of operations at Dimona at the time, I thought there was enough plutonium available only for one or two cores).

Since I had been trained at Dimona as a radiation-safety officer, my primary job was to take care of the “package” by using Geiger and other counters to verify the safety and security of the object—the core—and to ascertain that no radiation leakage was present. Plutonium emits both alpha and gamma radiation. I was therefore charged with monitoring both types of radiation with two different detectors. Twice a day (morning and late afternoon), I would measure the radiation emanating from the object—if any. There was indeed radiation emanating from it. Hence, it was the “real thing.” It was stored in a room well inside the building. The room where it was stored was always locked. I had the only key to the door.

The warm days of late May were quite amiable and relatively uneventful. We, the platoon and I, had become accustomed to the routine in the compound. The border guardsmen seemed to enjoy the “vacation” given to them, since they did not have to constantly train; they considered their eight-hour shifts to be mere “office duty.” On the four corners of the compound, there were four guard towers, each about ten feet high. We installed a patrolman in each tower, armed with a heavy machine gun. I also assigned foot patrols around the perimeter of the compound.

The border guardsmen were ordered never to enter the building unless told to do so. On the other side of the corridor leading to the room with the device, I posted two armed guards, to ensure that no one went past their station. At first, the cover story I was told to convey to the troops guarding the compound, including their commander, was that there were special chemicals for arms manufacturing stored in the room. However, I changed the story from chemicals to avionics, as the border patrol commander was concerned about the safety of his men so close to chemicals, not knowing what was stored there.

It was the last week of May. The atmosphere in the country was a mix of uncertainty and bellicosity. We at the compound felt the same way. During my inspections, I reflected on the fact that I had under my control the first Jewish, Israeli nuclear core. I had read some books and articles about the origins of the atomic bomb and recognized the enormous contributions of Jewish physicists to the making of the bomb—from Albert Einstein to Enrico Fermi and Leo Szilard. I would stand in this small room and stare at the object with much awe, having seen photos and movies of the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. From time to time, I would discuss with the commander of the troops the procedures to move the core to an assembly point, where it would join with the remainder of the device. On these occasions and on every occasion that I stood alone with the core, I’d silently pray and wish that we should never employ this horrific invention of humanity. I knew perfectly well that the use of the device would be the “last resort” of the political leadership of the country, whose policy was, and remains to this day, to not be the first to introduce nuclear weapons to the Middle East, neither confirming nor denying the Israeli nuclear-weapon capability.

At one point during that last week of May, we had a visit from former IDF chief of staff Moshe Dayan, then a private citizen, although his name was already being circulated as a possible candidate to replace Eshkol as minister of defense. I do not recall the full circumstances of the visit, by whom or how it was arranged, but I think he came with *Minhal* boss Dostrovsky and a small entourage. I recall that he was very excited to learn that this was a real core of a nuclear weapon. He asked me if this the real thing, and I confirmed it was, pointing out the radiation that the Geiger counter detected.^[3]

It was a Friday afternoon, June 2, 1967, the last Friday before the war. The sun was shining and the weather was hot. The commander of the guards asked if they could relax and perhaps play a ball game in the yard of the compound. I agreed and, in fact, I took off my shirt and participated in the game. As we were enjoying this exercise, one of the soldiers called me aside and said that there was a group of people outside the gate, asking for the commander in charge. I walked over

with him to the gate, and indeed there was a command car with an officer and a few soldiers parked outside the gate. I asked the officer, who wore a colonel's insignia, to identify himself and the reason for his being there. He replied that his name was Colonel Yitzhak Yaakov, and that he had come to take control of the compound. I smiled and said that this was impossible, and that this place was simply a training facility. He asked me to identify myself and I replied with my name and military serial number. I did not give him my rank, and since I was shirtless, he could not tell my rank from my shoulders' insignia. (As noted, my rank was *segen*, or lieutenant, as a result of a temporary administrative commission). He told me he must inspect the facility and that he would apply force to get in. I replied that we would apply force to prevent him from entering. He asked for the names of my superiors and I replied that I don't call them, they call me.

Colonel Yaakov became very irritated. He repeated his demands and I repeated my lines until he turned around and left. He promised to be back the next day, and indeed he returned the next morning (Saturday, June 3), accompanied by a contingent of IDF cadets—as many as could be brought in a couple of transport trucks—from the Army officers' course Training Camp Number One. He looked serious and determined. I again explained that he could not enter and that if he tried to use force, we would unnecessarily spill Israeli blood.

On an emergency basis, I contacted Dostrovsky or someone on his behalf. Yes, they knew about Colonel Yaakov and his visit, but for some reason—someone forgot or something else—did not inform me. A compromise was arranged at higher level, whereby the facility would be monitored jointly by the two groups: the guardsmen and Yaakov's cadets. Thus, the matter was resolved.

It was then that I was generally told about the contingency military plan that Yaakov oversaw (on its military side). I understood that I was supposed to be part of it, as part of the *Minhal's* contingent on one of the helicopters. But I was never privy to the full details of the plan.

When I think of this incident in over half a century retrospect I still think that I conducted myself well in that encounter. The facts are that Colonel Yaakov showed up at a highly secret installation, without prior communication and without any written orders or authorization signed by an appropriate authority. Think about it: Could any Tom, Dick and Harry just show up, say, at Los Alamos in 1944 and demand to take over the facility? What do you think the Los Alamos garrison would have done? As far as I am concerned, Yaakov was a bully, an ignorant officer, a shame to his uniform, and totally unaware or unwilling to recognize fundamental standards of military order. Who gave him the right to show up at this installation and demand control of it? This was not just Israeli typical *balagan* [lack of order, in Hebrew], this was outrageously stupid, a very unwelcome trait of the best military in the Middle East.

As noted, in 1967 to 1969, Kuni arranged various technical "assignments" for me within the *Minhal* and its facilities, but my real job as his special assistant on matters of organization and management was formally created only in 1969—an organization and methods officer in Kuni's office. Since the very organizational structure of the *Minhal* was both bureaucratically tricky (the double-hat system noted earlier) and highly classified, there was a great deal of ambiguity and a lack of clarity about responsibilities and authorities in relation to RAFAEL, the Ministry of Defense, Treasury, and the Prime Minister's Office. My own role, from 1969 to 1973, was to assist Kuni and, through him, Director-General Dostrovsky (and later Director-General Shalheveth Freier) on matters of organization.

I was charged with proposing a better bureaucratic structure for the *Minhal*, with clear definitions of each function, including ways and means of collaboration and communication among the members of the Atomic Energy Commission and the *Minhal*. This task was focused on formalizing the organizational structure and the processes of the Authority. This was a challenging project, which coincided with the subject matter of my Master of Business Administration Studies at Tel Aviv University, which I began after completing my undergraduate degree there. Tel Aviv University was

a block away from the Commission's building, which made it easy for me to attend classes during the day and return to work within a few minutes' walk. Kuni was a very understanding boss and he valued education above all else. He always encouraged me to apply for my doctorate after completing my MBA studies. (Kuni passed away at an early age from cancer in the 1970s while I was studying for my doctorate at Northwestern University).

It was in that period that I heard more about the 1967 situation. I recall one afternoon, sometime in the 1969–72 period, Director-General Dostrovsky, Kuni and I discussed some issues or scenarios concerning hypothetical wartime deployment of nuclear weapons, because they felt that such actions should be described in the procedures of the *Minhal*. The director then described the scene in 1968 or so, in the prime minister's office, when IDF Chief of Staff Haim Barlev and General David Elazar had advocated the army's need for "operational" control of the device—namely to add it to the arsenal of weapons at their disposal. The prime minister strongly objected and demanded the continuation of the status quo, namely, that the weapon remain under his absolute control.

Hearing this story, I argued to Dostrovsky and Kuni that it was impossible to create a set of procedures when the whole issue of who gives the order and under what circumstances was still undecided. The director then tabled the issue. I don't know when it was later reopened, although I am certain it was, but without my participation. Some years later, I was told by a colleague who was still working at the *Minhal* that strict procedures had been put in place and that I "would be proud of what has been achieved." I trust, for the sake of the country and the region, that this is indeed the case.

^[1] Although I had kept some notes of my work in the Israeli nuclear program, this narrative is not and should not be viewed as a diary. This narrative offers the general tenor of events as accurately as possible and the atmosphere and spirit of these highly crucial events. This narrative, however, does not claim to be a full and comprehensive historical account. It is an eyewitness account.

^[2] *Egged* is Israel's largest bus company and allows IDF service personnel to travel free of charge.

^[3] The National Unity Government under which Dayan became Minister of Defense was presented on the evening of Thursday, June 1, 1967; Dayan's first day as Minister of Defense was Friday, June 2.