Part II

RETURN OF PRISONERS-OF-WAR

If hopes were dupes, fears may be liars;
It may be, in yon smoke conceal'd,
Your comrades chase even now the fliers,
And but for you, possess the field.

"Say not the Struggle" by A.H. Clough

A/10
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Our Prisoners-of-War Return from Captivity in Syria

On June 6 - eight months to the day from the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War - the last of Israel's sixty-eight prisoners who had spent the long months in Syrian captivity, returned home.

After the emotion-laden reunions at Ben-Gurion Airport, reporters followed the men to their homes and began asking them questions. Some of the P.o.W.'s refused to speak at all. One pilot would not give details of his ordeal, saying he didn't want his parents to know what he had gone through. All were reluctant to speak at length of the hardships they had suffered.

Nevertheless, their story is being told. Bit by bit, a tale of inhumane treatment, beatings, bizarre forms of torture, and isolation is unfolding. The interview which follows is with Pilot Gabi Gerson.

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For eight months Eden, the four-year-old son of Skyhawk Pilot Gabi Gerson, back from Syrian captivity, used to climb into the toy car in the kindergarten, twist the wheel back and forth, and beg his friends: "Let me alone now for a minute. I'm driving to Syria, to my father. I'm going by myself." He would then turn the wheel with greater force, as if to lend determination to his purpose.

At the beginning of June, Daddy Gabi sat on the small lawn in front of his dwelling in Kibbutz Maayan-Zvi. The children were there - Eden and his two-year-old sister and Mommy and friends from Gabi's squadron. "Well, Eden," someone asked, "are you driving to Syria?" Eden gazed at the questioner suspiciously; these grownups were really funny. "What for?" he demanded. "Daddy's here. What would I do in Syria?"

Gabi Gerson, thirty, roared away in his Skyhawk on Yom Kippur, shooting, bombing, rocketing, for a whole week. On Saturday, a week after the outbreak of the war, he went out on a sortie early in the morning. It was his last.

How did it happen, Gabi?

Gabi thinks before replying, a long time. For a moment I have the feeling of being elsewhere. I see him and I study his face, but his mind seems to be far away, jarred back and forth over a difficult period of 230 days.

Then he comes back to me. He speaks quietly, without emotion, as if the subject were foreign to him.

I ran into ack-ack fire

How it happened? I ran into ack-ack fire. The plane fell apart in midair. I managed to bail out the last minute. I parachuted down in an area full of Syrian soldiers. They got to the spot very quickly. Before they came near they began shooting at me from all directions. When I saw I had no chance of getting away - there were so many of them - I stopped, raised my hands and gave myself up. I tried not to make any suspicious moves, I tried not to make them nervous, else one of them might fire a burst by mistake. Their behavior was according to the rules. No beating, no prodding. Several senior Syrian officers in the area took over. They put me into a car and drove quickly to Damascus. There they took me straight to the first interrogation. It was pretty thorough, the way the Syrians interrogate.

What did they do to you?

I'd rather not go into details. I can't. Suffice to say, as a result of the interrogation I was taken to the hospital.

They took you to the hospital directly from the interrogation?

No. I was in perfect shape when we first came to Damascus. I landed well and nothing happened on the way from that spot to Damascus. In the course of the interrogation they shattered my left leg, below the knee. Nothing was left ot it. Then they threw me into a solitary cell.

You were conscious all this time?

Yes, except for a few lapses during that first interrogation. From then on I didn't lose consciousness, even though I had many reasons to do so. I held on. I wanted to be conscious. I wanted to be in control for whatever was in store for me, whatever they would yet do to me.

"Doctor, Doctor!"

Did you ask for a doctor?

I asked. I asked again and again. From the adjoining cells my friends, also pilots, kept crying out: "Doctor, Doctor!" I tried to identify the voices, but could not always do it.

How long were you in that cell?

Two whole weeks. The two weeks were one long night. Two weeks of abnormal pain. Two weeks of feeling that it was all over for my leg. But I kept my morale up. It's interesting - amazing, in fact, and hard to understand. It was just the joy of knowing that you're still alive. I'm alive, I'm alive. I used to repeat it over and over again, whenever that cursed leg would dim my consciousness. The lodgings were horrible. It was a solitary dungeon. All I had was two thin blankets. It was very cold. At times I couldn't tell which was worse, my leg or the cold. I used to take a look at it. It was gone, beyond help.

During those two weeks, did they keep interrogating or torturing you?

A bit, nothing serious. A spit in the face now and then. A few blows with a stick. Compared with what I suffered in that first interrogation, this was fun.

Were you afraid that your life was in danger, as the result of lack of medical treatment?

No, I didn't think about it. All that time I believed that they would get me a doctor. I tried to reason it out. That they hated me and would vent

their anger against me - this I knew without any doubt. But they also had reason to keep me alive, so as to keep interrogating me. I didn't think that they would give my name to Israel, and I knew that this wouldn't keep them from murdering me. But I believed that they would keep me alive for their own interests. I did fear that my leg was becoming dangerously gangrenous. I gradually began to lose sensitivity in various parts of the leg. First I lost the feeling of my instep, then the loss of feeling spread over the other parts. But I still thought that it might be saved.

The Other Leg Was Also Damaged

After two weeks a hospital orderly came, examined me, and said: "Tomorrow they'll take you to the hospital." But I didn't have to wait for the next day. The orderly probably told them what he had found, because the same evening they came and took me to a hospital. I lost the leg instantly, express. They amputated it that same evening. The situation was hopeless; the entire system was out. The other leg had also been injured, but not as much. It was saved.

How were the conditions and treatment in the hospital?

For two and a half months they kept me in a confined cell. My eyes were shut and covered all the time. It was like living in a world of darkness. I could hardly tell when it was day and when it was night. The hospital guards kept beating me. Just like that. It wasn't that they asked questions and I refused to answer. They simply enjoyed it. They wouldn't allow a doctor to see me except at long intervals. They beat me every day. A smack on the face, on the head. They had orders not to hit me, just to treat me like a human being. But these were plain soldiers, savages, enemies. They couldn't control themselves. They were taking out on me their natural desire to hit somebody. They would deliver the blow and move on, then come back and do it again, laughing as they did it.

Did you complain to anyone about these beatings?

There was a sergeant in charge who kept telling them that they were not to

hit me. It didn't help. I told one of the doctors about it. "Why am I being beaten - in a hospital?" I asked. The doctor said it would stop. The sergeant asked them: "Why do you hit him?" They said: "He was talking." It was forbidden to talk, to make a sound.

Concern for the Family

Did you have any idea who of your friends was nearby?

Yes. First it was Ze'ev Nesher. There was a wall separating us. Then Asael came.

What depressed you most in the hospital, aside from the pain and the beating?

Worrying about the family. That terrible fear that they didn't know I was alive. I felt like crying out, deep from within me: I'm alive! I'm alive!

When were you first allowed to write letters?

One day they brought me paper and a pen and said: "You want to write home? Then write, whatever you want." I knew that even if they allowed me to write, it would be only a few lines, and these would be inspected closely. Anyway, the first time they let us write was a few days before the Red Cross people were there. I wrote: "I feel well. Medium wounds." I didn't want them to worry.

When did you receive the first letter from home?

Not before May 15, seven months after my capture. I hadn't the slightest idea what was going on back home. Not a word. All in all, I received two letters from the family during my entire period of captivity. They wrote dozens of letters.

Did you try to set up communication with the doctors and orderlies in the hospital?

Yes. This was very important for me, and not just to ease the terrible loneliness. It was a terrible feeling to lie there, in the darkness, and not know if the war was over or who won and where the Syrians were and where our arms were.

The doctors lied

What information did you succeed in getting out of the doctors and the guards?

They lied to me. They lied all the time. They said: "We defeated you. At last we defeated you!" I didn't believe them. "You didn't win," I said to myself. "You couldn't win." I was told that the morale in Israel was low. This depressed me. I once saw a cartoon in some foreign newspaper showing Golda throwing an earthen pitcher on a woman, and the woman was inscribed as 'October 1973'. "You see," the guards said gleefully. "You had a bad year. You lost. Golda wants to do away with this year. But you won't be able to forget it."

I saw another cartoon, of General Arik Sharon, his chest stuck out, standing like a giant, one foot ona tank, and above was a caption: "Arik Sharon, King of Israel"; he wore a gold crown, and next to him, shriveled and frightened, were Moshe Dayan and Golda Meir. The Syrians wanted to know what this meant. I told them that Arik Sharon was one of our generals and he had probably succeeded in accomplishing something unusual in the war. Once they said to me: "You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Look how the Syrians treat their prisoners. In Israel they treat them very badly. Asad is a fine person. He's an outstanding man. He has given orders to treat you well." I said: "If your people have it so bad in Israel and we have it so good here, why don't you exchange prisoners?"

All because of Moshe Dayan

They said: "That's because of Moshe Dayan. He doesn't want to give us what we're demanding. If he would, we would have already made the exchange." I asked: "What is it that you're demanding of Israel that Moshe Dayan doesn't want to give you?" They said: "We want all of the Hermon and we want the territory you took from Syria in October and we want Kuneitra." Then I knew that we had won the war, that we took the Hermon, and that our army was holding new territory inside Syria. It was a wonderful feeling. We knew all about Dr. Kissinger's travels. We knew about the separation of forces arrangements with Egypt. We knew about the exchange of prisoners with Egypt. This made us happy. But we also knew about the government crisis. This was a very depressing feeling.

How did this feeling affect you?

From the bits of news which we managed to piece together we knew that Israel had undergone better wars than this one. I know my people. This is how it behaves: if it scores a success, the cry is: "There's a God, there's a God!" If not, it screams: "The umpire is a sonafabitch." It was really a terrible heartache, that the morale in the country had dropped so low that the people couldn't grasp the meaning of our victory. That's how I felt all during my imprisonment.

Let it be known I am alive

Why were you selected to appear on an interview over the French television?

I assume it's because I expressed opposition to the bombing of civilians. When the French asked the Syrians to allow them to interview an Israeli captive, they decided I was the suitable one. I had a specific reason for wanting this interview - to let it be known that I was alive. I knew my family would be overjoyed. The Syrians deleted the part where I told the French interviewer that I had gotten to Damascus in good physical condition. They also deleted the portions where I told how the Syrians treated us. Of course they retained the part where I said good things about the doctors. But they deserved it.

What happened to you after the two and a half months that you spent in the hospital?

They threw me into a small cell in prison.

Did they beat you again?

No. They didn't even get to see me. Three times a day the door would open and the guard would slide in a dish with food. One a week they took me to have a shower.

Were you taken out for physical recreation?

No, we had no such trips. Only once did a doctor come to ask me how I was feeling. He left a few vitamin pills to swallow. Generally the attitude improved. We could feel it. But during this additional month in solitary confinement - it was this way for four months, including my hospital stay - I had another adventure. In the cell I fell on the open stump of my feet, from the raised concrete cot onto the rim of the toilet hole in the floor. The foot began swelling. I felt I was going into a fever. My temperature shot up. It was getting worse. I kept asking for a doctor, but none came. I was sure that this poisoning would be the end of me. I didn't want to leave the earth, although my condition left me little to lose. I used my fingernail to gouge a hole into the flesh of the stump. The pain was excrutiating, but I didn't give up. With my final bit of strength, I pushed down on my foot, forcing the pus to ooze downward and out. A few hours later the fever began to leave me, and in two days it was over.

The second greatest day

Did they let you meet with other prisoners, after those four months?

After those four months came the second greatest day in my life. The greatest was when I returned home. You know something? I don't know which was the greater. Not at all sure. One evening, after four months, they came and took me, with my mattress, the plate, the spoon, and brought me to a large room - and I didn't believe my eyes. There were our ten pilots and navigators.

I had difficulty recognizing them. They were thin, transparent like. You can't describe this meeting in words. For forty-eight hours we didn't shut our eyes. We sat and talked and talked, in whispers. We were rid of our solitude, and our morale shot up sky high. The healthy ones helped the wounded. We set up a routine.

Less favorable conditions

What information did you have about the other prisoners?

We knew that they were being kept in two separate cells, in two groups. Their condition was worse than ours, although they did have the privilege of being brought together before we were.

When did you learn that you were going home?

Definitely, only last Saturday morning. The guards came in and told us to get dressed because we were going home. But we had signs of it earlier. The atmosphere kept changing. On May 15 specialist doctors came in and took measurements of my stump, to see how high it was from the floor. They were amazed to find that I already had an artificial leg. I had already figured that such a limb would hurt and I would have to get used to one, so why should I wait until I got home to suffer the pain? I got hold of a wooden crate and made several slats of equal length. I upholstered these with stockings and clothing, made the whole thing fast with string, and attached it to the stump. At first it was horrible. But each day I added a few minutes and got used to it. I learned how to walk. When they attached their limb - and it wasn't the best in the world - I was accustomed to it. I thought I could even run.

(Article by Dov Goldstein, which appeared in the Hebrew newspaper MA'ARIV, June 7, 1974)