

# Robert Maxwell: A Spy Betrayed—But Whose Spy?

by George Canning

---

**Robert Maxwell, Israel's Superspy:  
The Life and Murder of a Media Mogul**  
by Gordon Thomas and Martin Dillon  
New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2002  
448 pages, hardbound, \$27.00

---

This book on the late London-based publisher and tycoon Robert Maxwell is less a biography than an exposition of particular aspects of Maxwell's life and death. It particularly focusses upon Maxwell's role as an international operative of the Israeli state and the Mossad intelligence service, his financial operations in the East bloc before and after the fall of the Soviet Union, his multimillion-dollar financial scams in the West, and his role in the emergence of a true international alliance of organized crime.

The central feature of the book is the assertion that Maxwell's apparent drowning death in 1991 from his yacht in the Canary Islands was in fact an assassination by the Mossad. According to the authors, Maxwell tried to escape insolvency as his monumental scams caught up with him, by attempting to blackmail the Mossad with knowledge gained as one of their high-level operatives. A short time later, Maxwell was killed by a Mossad *kidon* assassination team.

The book is loosely structured as material in the *kidon* operational dossier of Maxwell's life, habits, and associates. Much of the material on Maxwell and the Mossad is attributed directly or by implication to interviews with figures from the Israeli defense and intelligence establishment. The interviewees named by Thomas and Dillon include the late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin; former head of Military Intelligence and

Prime Minister Ehud Barak; former Military Intelligence head Uri Saguy; former Mossad Directors-General Meir Amit and Isser Harel; former Mossad Assistant Director-General David Kimche; former Mossad Director of Operations Rafi Eytan; former Mossad field officers Juval Aviv and Eli Cohen; and "Efraim" of the *kidon* unit that killed Maxwell. Mossad "renegades" Ari Ben-Menashe and Victor Ostrovsky are major sources as well, who appear to have confirmed, from their own sources still in the Mossad, the allegation that a right-wing cabal in Mossad killed Maxwell. Notably absent from the list of sources are Yitzhak Shamir and Shabtai Shavit, respectively the Prime Minister and the Mossad Director-General at the time of Maxwell's death.

The assertion that Maxwell was an Israeli asset is not a new one; Seymour Hersh asserted in his 1991 book on Israel's nuclear armaments, *The Samson Option*, that Maxwell had acted as a Mossad agent in his media campaign of vilification against Mordechai Vanunu, the Israeli physicist who had revealed that Israel had the bomb. What is new, so far as I can tell, are rather impressionistic descriptions of his 1984 recruitment to gather intelligence on the post-Brezhnev Soviet Union, and a more detailed recounting of Israeli involvement in the Inslaw case in the United States.

### The Inslaw Case

Inslaw was a small software firm owned by a former U.S. National Security Agency employee, which developed "case-tracking" software called PROMIS (Prosecutor's Management Information System), which it licensed to the U.S. Justice Department for use in complex prosecutions. Presumably, such software was designed to allow DOJ prosecutors to keep track of a complicated mass of trial information.

The DOJ violated the licensing agreements with Inslaw

and provided copies of the PROMIS software to various other agencies of the United States and its perceived allies. According to Thomas's and Dillon's book, pirate copies of PROMIS were soon being marketed all over the world by one or more companies owned by Maxwell, by a firm owned by Reagan-Meese associate Earl Brian, and by the CIA. One of the key persons providing introductions for Maxwell's marketing the software to U.S. agencies including Sandia Lab, the book states, was former Sen. John Tower (R-Tex.), who joined Maxwell's payroll in 1984, during his last year in the U.S. Senate. (The book asserts that it was through Maxwell and his agent Tower, that the Israelis persuaded President Reagan, in Summer 1985, to begin providing arms to the Iranians—an assertion which if true, moves the Tower Commission investigation of "Iran-Contra" out of the character of coverup, and into the realm of historical joke.)

The primary attraction of the software was not its use for litigation, but the fact that PROMIS could integrate "innumerable" databases, for accessing and organizing intelligence data. According to Thomas and Dillon:

In Holland, Intel used it to track the activities of the Russian Mafia as it shipped arms and drugs through Schipol Airport. In Germany the BND, the nation's equivalent to the CIA, used the software to follow the trail of nuclear materials out of the former Soviet Union into the Middle East. In France, the security Services used Promis to track terrorists in and out of North Africa. In Spain, the software was used to keep tabs on the Basque terrorist movement. In Britain, MI5 used it to watch the movements of the scores of Middle East groups who had set up base in London. In Northern Ireland, it became a weapon for the security services tracking the IRA as its members came and went across the border with the Irish Republic. In Scotland, it formed a database for what became the long-running investigation into the terrorist destruction of Pan Am 103. In Hong Kong, Britain's MI6 used the program to track the Triads and agents from the People's Republic. In Japan, Promis was used to interdict the links between the Japanese underworld and its counterparts in North Korea and mainland China. The software allowed Sweden to maintain a watch over foreign diplomats in the country, especially those from Eastern Europe who might be using their political immunity to set up arms-traffic networks.



*Robert Maxwell (right) with Ariel Sharon, now Israel's Prime Minister. A former high-level Israeli operative, Maxwell is alleged to have been murdered by a right-wing cabal in the Mossad, when he threatened to step out of line.*

Indeed, the "counterintelligence application" of PROMIS sounds not a little like Adm. John Poindexter's present-day "Total Information Awareness" system for data-mining the nation's financial and government databases for Pentagon domestic security operations.

But the version of PROMIS marketed first through Earl Brian and later through a Maxwell company, Information on Demand, had a little something extra. Thomas and Dillon describe how the Mossad's Rafi Eytan allegedly personally conned a copy of PROMIS out of DOJ in February 1983, and then had his LEKEM scientific-espionage unit re-engineer the software. (Eytan, who told Thomas in a 1998 British TV documentary that he'd provided the Brits with PROMIS to track IRA Provo terrorists, appears to have been the source of this detailed story.) *This LEKEM version marketed by Maxwell, had a "trap door" in it, which allowed Israeli intelligence to monitor the computers of law enforcement or intelligence agencies which were using Eytan's PROMIS, anywhere in the world.* LEKEM's PROMIS operation appears to have occurred in the same timeframe as Eytan and LEKEM oversaw Jonathan Pollard's espionage against the United States; the only link stated by the authors, is that Eytan and Mossad Director Admoni saw Maxwell's marketing of PROMIS as a way to continue penetrating U.S. intelligence after Pollard's arrest.

### **Sold to Osama bin Laden?**

The authors assert that it was discovered a month after the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, that a copy of PROMIS was stolen from DOJ by rogue FBI

intelligence agent Robert Hanssen, who provided it to his Moscow controllers, who in turn sold it to Russian-Israeli organized crime godfather (and sometime Maxwell business partner) Simeon Mogilevitch, who sold it at a huge mark-up to Osama bin Laden. This, the authors claim, is why bin Laden has been able to evade capture—he's been monitoring his trackers.

The capabilities of PROMIS in tracking terrorists raise important questions about 9/11, regardless of whether bin Laden had the software. One of the striking things about the investigation of those attacks, as reported in the daily news media, was the speed with which the accused hijackers' biographies, and their movements on several continents, were purportedly developed by investigators and reported to the public. The speed of the portrayed post-9/11 investigation of those subjects (supposedly starting from a review of the airliners' passenger lists) contradicted the physical constraints of any background investigation, such as the time necessary to identify and then locate and contact possible witnesses for questioning, or an interviewee's lack of recollection or contradiction of other sources. Given the 9/11 investigation's putative supersession of the laws of space and time, and the assertions of PROMIS's capabilities in the hands of multiple intelligence agencies, it is reasonable to speculate that the radical Islamic fundamentalists said to have carried out the attacks, were in fact "on the radar" of those agencies long before those attacks. That is, whatever the real or supposed blunders of the FBI and other agencies in the ground-level investigation of, for example, suspicious activities at flight-schools—so what, if PROMIS tracked Mohammed Atta et al. from Frankfurt and London radical imams, to the United States?

### British Connection Ignored

The focus upon Maxwell's activities for the Mossad, described explicitly in the context of his alleged assassination by that agency, and the description of Mossad minutiae, are interesting; but the fact that the story is told so heavily from an Israeli point of view is a major weakness in evaluating Maxwell, whose life story raises a much larger question than his activities on behalf of the Israeli state.

The book's Israel-orientation and its omission of Maxwell's activities for the British government and its intelligence services, obscures the complicated "character type," typified by Maxwell, in post-World War II diplomacy and espionage: the high-profile figure who is plausibly viewed as an agent, spy, or agent-of-influence simultaneously, of several governments in conflict with each other—particularly the United States, Great Britain, the Soviet Union and East bloc, and Israel—all of which know or suspect he is working for adversary intelligence services. The paradox of such figures as Maxwell, Armand Hammer, Henry Kissinger, Marc Rich, and the Bronfmans—of which intelligence service ultimately guided their actions—is usually resolved by selecting a coun-

try which seems to have benefitted the most from the agent's activity. Thomas and Dillon's presentation of Maxwell from the Israeli viewpoint, from his birth in the *shtetl* to his burial in the Mount of Olives cemetery in Jerusalem, predictably resolves the paradox in the case of Robert Maxwell, but only by ignoring other compelling evidence.

For example, although the book's exposition of Maxwell's biography is sketchy for the period prior to the mid-1980s, his family's background in the rural Jewish ghetto of Czechoslovakia, and his own childhood there (born in 1923 as Abraham Ludvik), are described in quite some detail. The key factor in Maxwell's life, as the book paints the story, is his identity as a Jew.

This is probably true, as far as it goes. As other sources make clear, there is little doubt that Maxwell was—despite his public reputation as a willing tool of the Communist bloc—an ardent right-wing Zionist. In her 1994 memoirs (which appear to repeat the official biography of her husband), Maxwell's widow, Elisabeth, related that Maxwell's mother was an active member of the Czech Social Democratic Party, and later of the Zionist movement; the young Ludvik/Maxwell was a member of the Jabotinskyite Betar youth organization, and later of an underground Zionist movement, while a student in Bratislava. More importantly, in 1990 the German Jewish magazine *Semit* reported that Maxwell (despite his image as a Labor Party supporter), the Bronfmans, and Henry Kissinger were taking over the Israeli media to strengthen the right wing around Yitzhak Shamir and Ariel Sharon. A year before, when Maxwell had attempted to buy the *Jerusalem Post*, that paper's staff expressed trepidation, in light of Maxwell's earlier crackdown at *Ma'ariv* (of which he had purchased 33% in 1988) when it published a report that Israeli intelligence had criticized Prime Minister Shamir for not talking with the Palestine Liberation Organization.

Thomas and Dillon relate that among the things Maxwell learned at his mother's knee, was that "to behave and act like an Englishman is to be successful," which literarily foreshadows his success as a British media baron. But the book largely omits the story of how Maxwell became a successful Englishman, and in so doing completely obscures his ties to the British government and intelligence beginning in the 1940s. The authors do outline Maxwell's having served in various British army units during World War II, following his entry to Britain with the Czech Legion in 1940; his assignment to an intelligence unit because of his language skills; and his having distinguished himself after the 1944 Allied invasion of Europe as a sniper and interrogator of German prisoners. The book also reports as Maxwell's initial foray into intelligence, his interrogation of high-level German prisoners after the war at Spandau Prison (where Rudolf Hess, Joseph Goebbels, and Hjalmar Schacht were interned).

However, the book omits any mention of Maxwell's intelligence assignment in liberated Paris, monitoring the French Communists. More important, it is absolutely silent about his

role in the post-war occupation of Germany. It was reported in a 1994 German documentary that Maxwell was press officer for the British Control Commission, responsible for overseeing German-language press in Berlin and issuing licenses. Mrs. Maxwell said in her memoirs, that his post was “censor to the newly revived Berlin press” as an officer of Public Relations and Information Services Control; and that there, he made many contacts in the publishing world.

Utilizing those contacts, Maxwell in January 1947 started a company called European Periodicals, Publicity and Advertising Company (EPPAC), aimed at reviving exports of German scientific, technical, and medical publications. In late 1947, he contracted with Germany’s Springer Verlag publishing house for the exclusive worldwide sales and distribution rights of their books and journals. By June 1948, according to Mrs. Maxwell, he had signed distribution contracts with “some of the most prestigious German scientific, medical and technical publishing houses” and “EPPAC had already begun deliveries to customers and libraries via Her Majesty’s Stationery Office at a time when EPCOM—the official Enemy Publications Committee set up by Churchill in 1945 expressly to import the huge cache of German classified scientific information—had still not even managed to fix an appropriate exchange rate.” A firm set up in 1949 by Maxwell and Springer Verlag, Lange Maxwell & Springer, took over and expanded EPPAC’s import-export operations during the early 1950s. One should consider in examining this stage of Maxwell’s career, that intelligence work often is less the obtaining of secret nuggets of information, than reliably establishing what various nations’ key thinkers have in their minds.

In 1949, Maxwell purchased Butterworth Springer, a German scientific-books publishing joint venture of Springer Verlag and the British publisher Butterworth and Co., which he later renamed Pergamon Press. As reported in earlier biographies of Maxwell, Butterworth Springer had had its origins in a 1946 “suggestion” to Butterworth by the British government, that it enter the field of scientific publishing. One of the key figures in the formation of the joint venture company, and its later sale to Maxwell, was British MI6 official Count Frederick vanden Heuvel, who, Thomas and Dillon report, tried unsuccessfully in post-war Berlin to recruit Maxwell as a part-time MI6 agent. Pergamon under Maxwell became a leading scientific publisher. According to British intelligence sources, the British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) underwrote Pergamon to gain access to Soviet and East bloc scientists’ biographies and their papers. Mrs. Maxwell related that her husband’s partner in Pergamon, Paul Rosbaud, had served as a British spy inside the Nazi science establishment, and it



*Robert Maxwell with then-British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, whom he described as one of his trusted friends. Maxwell’s ties to the British intelligence services went a bit beyond “friendship.”*

was he who “cleared Bob in the worlds of the SIS, SOE and XU (Resistance Intelligence Organization), allowing him to cooperate at the height of the cold war with scientists involved in top-secret work on both sides of the Atlantic and behind the Iron Curtain.”

So the Israeli spy Maxwell seems, despite his lifelong Zionist emotional attachment to Eretz Israel, to have been *also* a long-term British agent, an activity which continued up through his adventures in post-Soviet Russia and Eastern Europe. How could he have been, really and truly, both? That paradox is posed by the new revelations about Maxwell and the Mossad by Thomas and Dillon, but remains unanswered.

I cannot help but wonder about the high profile in this book of members of the Israeli establishment—what *their* purpose was in contributing to this book. Books about the Mossad always raise the question, how much is exposé, how much *Schrecklichkeit* (a demonstration of ruthlessness). It is said that even in radical Jewish politics, there was a long-held taboo against killing another Jew, and that this taboo was broken when the Israeli right wing killed Prime Minister Rabin in 1995. It is well known that Sharon and the Israeli right have financed the zombie killers of ordinary Israeli citizens, to undermine Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian Authority. If this book is correct, the same forces also killed one of their own, Robert Maxwell. One can only hope that elements of the Israeli elite have decided that the murders of Maxwell and Rabin for reasons of state were unconscionable; and that those murders, along with a host of bad Israeli military and intelligence policies to similar effect, have to be rethought and superseded—as the Israeli Defense Forces general, Rabin, rethought Israel’s relations with the Palestinians—for Israel to survive.