

PROLOGUE

**Israel, September 10, 2019, 7:23 pm. Channel 11
Breaking News.**

“Several minutes ago, the United States Supreme Court ruled unanimously in favor of the US Internal Revenue Service, the IRS, in its claim against General Citizens Bank of Israel. According to the court’s decision, General Citizens Bank will pay a fine of US\$4 billion for criminal violations committed against the American tax authority. The Supreme Court affirmed the decision of the New York State District Court finding General Citizens Bank guilty of conspiring with a leading international financial institution to knowingly and systematically provide misleading information to US tax authorities by initiating and leading measures designed to help American citizens evade their tax obligations estimated at hundreds of millions of dollars. In addition, the court urged prosecutors to pursue criminal and civil penalties against bank executives and directors for their involvement.

“Our economic correspondent, Joseph Davidi, reports that the bank refused to comment on the verdict. We will continue to follow and update as this story unfolds.”

**Israel, September 10, 2019, 8:00 pm. Channel 11
Evening News Edition.**

“At the top of our news this evening is the shocking report regarding the United States Supreme Court decision in the case of the American IRS against General

Citizens Bank. ‘A financial earthquake with severe implications for the Israeli economy,’ said a senior official at the Bank of Israel who wished to remain anonymous. General Citizens Bank was ordered to pay fines of over \$4 billion for committing tax fraud and failing to comply with US tax regulations.

“Our economic correspondent, Joseph Davidi, reports that the decision came following failed arbitration attempts in which General Citizens Bank offered to pay a fine of \$500 million in return for waiving any claims against the bank and its directors. Our correspondent adds that Bank of Israel officials expressed deep concern over these reports, believing that the enforcement of this ruling could lead to GCB’s liquidation and criminal proceedings against its executives. Furthermore, officials fear that this ruling could very well lead the US tax authorities to tighten supervisory measures over other leading banks in Israel, impeding their ability to compete in international markets. Efforts to receive an official response from the bank’s spokesperson were unsuccessful. We will keep you updated on further developments.”

The federal ruling echoed across the financial markets and, within moments of the report, the bank’s share price plummeted. The news spread like wildfire, causing the bank to lose over a third of its value in what seemed to be a relentless downward spiral.

That morning in New York, a broker in a mid-size Manhattan investment firm received a phone call from an investor who had bought put up options earlier that week on General Citizens Bank and Israel’s financial sector index. With the collapse of the bank’s share price and the decline in Israel’s overall financial index, the

investor's portfolio grew from \$200,000 to just over \$2.5 million. The investor ordered the immediate divestment of all securities and remained on the line while the broker executed the order. Within moments, the transaction was complete and the investor's account was credited with the full amount, over twelve times his initial investment.

The investor was operating illegally as his actions were based on insider information - information he had access to by virtue of his position at General Citizens Bank. But this did little to dissuade him. It was merely one more offense added to the list of more serious crimes he had committed already. The only thing that mattered right now was to empty his New York investment account and transfer the money to a clandestine offshore account.

But why settle for this when even more money was just waiting for him to reach out and grab? The thought made him smile to himself.

After completing the transfer order and transmitting the funds to his account in the Virgin Islands, he returned to studying the screen in front of him. GCB's shares had lost 40% of their value. He was now expecting a trend reversal. He called his broker again, this time to buy GCB stock for a total of \$200,000. The broker, used to dealing with all types of speculators, preferred not to comment and performed the purchase order as requested.

He was not acting on a whim or a hunch. He was certain that, within hours, the Israeli government would provide the bank with full monetary support and GCB's shares, together with the Israeli financial sector index, would soar again, turning his new investment into another profitable venture.

By 6:00 am the next morning, two-and-a-half-hours before the bank's official opening hours, long queues of disgruntled, confused, and desperate customers were forming in front of all 300 branches of General Citizens Bank. Rumors, each worse than the last, spewed panic. The pessimists were convinced that the bank would go under, taking all their money with it. They believed that the Supreme Court's decision had just one connotation: GCB had ceased to exist, its branches becoming empty shells overnight.

A few clear optimists were waiting in the winding queues. They argued that GCB was so financially robust that four or even five billion in fines could not topple it. There were also those who claimed that the government would undoubtedly stand behind the bank and fully support it.

After thirty minutes of speculation and idle discussion meant mainly to settle their nerves, the lines turned gloomily quiet. The people counted the minutes to 8:30 am for the bank to open. Many feared the doors would not open at all. Quite a few stared at their phone screens searching for any updates, trying to gather bits of information from the various financial reporters who were all racing to release editorials and speculation on what was yet to come. Optimistic reports brought on cautious smiles of relief, while pessimistic editorials caused their readers to hurriedly scroll down the page as if they could wish them away.

The scene was reminiscent of the 1983 Israeli banks' shares crisis, during which the stock of the four largest banks in Israel collapsed and the banks were subsequently nationalized by the State. But there was one small difference. Back then, those affected were mainly investors who saw their bank shares lose all value, while now, GCB's ability to continue as a going concern was in question and its customers' savings were in jeopardy.

By 7:00 am, the optimists were proven right.

The country's leadership, with uncharacteristic efficiency, acted quickly and rolled out its heaviest cannons. This was evidence of the severity of the situation and the depth of the crisis and, of course, served to mitigate what could have resulted in uncontainable chaos.

The morning news began with the anchorman's solemn announcement: "Stay tuned to a message from the Prime Minister regarding the recent financial events." Several seconds later, the prime minister's confident and reassuring voice echoed through the various media outlets.

"The government, under my leadership, is committed to General Citizens Bank, offering our fullest support through this matter involving our close ally, the United States. Israel maintains a strong economy, one of the strongest in the world, with a sound banking system - unlike many of its regional counterparts. I would first like to advise that today, each and every one of us should act with restraint, remain calm and refrain from making hasty financial decisions that we may later regret. I instructed the Minister of Finance and the Governor of the Bank of Israel to direct all bank branches to open as usual and allow any request from the public to withdraw funds. I would like to emphasize again that there is no need for any rash action and urge you all to simply continue with your normal routine.

"I would like to clarify that the Government of Israel intends to support General Citizens Bank in its upcoming appeal against the court's decision, as an investigation conducted by the Bank of Israel indicates that illegal dealings, if any, were the private initiative of various individuals and not a part of the bank's course of business. Clearly, if any illegal conduct is discovered, we will act to bring those responsible to justice. I would like

to add that one of the bank's directors suspected in this matter is currently being questioned under caution by police. However, I would like to emphasize that this person shall remain innocent until proven guilty. I wish us all a calm and pleasant day.”

The prime minister's message proved a great success, especially given the general public's usual distrust of politicians' promises. Within a short while, the queues in front of GCB's branches dispersed and most people went on with their daily affairs. A handful of those lacking in faith remained to test the credibility of the prime minister's words. As promised, at 8:30 am, all GCB branches opened as usual. Anyone wishing to withdraw their funds was met with amicable service aside from a recommendation not to break a term deposit and irreversibly lose any interest accrued.

By 10:00 am, the matter had been brushed aside from the public agenda and returned to be the sole concern of the bank and the various financial regulatory institutions.

The exception was that one individual mentioned in the prime minister's statement, who was being questioned under caution in the National Fraud Investigation Unit, Lahav 433. The investigators were now trying to understand how he had managed to create such chaos, entangling the country in a conflict with its closest ally.

Four years earlier, February 2015, C&S Banking Group, Basel, Switzerland

“I'm not quite sure...” John Howard, a New Yorker who looked to be in his mid-forties, sounded hesitant. His mouse-gray suit appeared brand new, as if it had been bought specifically for this meeting.

Shame he never bothered to button his suit jacket, Hermann, Director of Foreign Banking at C&S mused to himself. Howard's deviation from the formal dress code vexed Hermann. After all, this was an important business meeting and a first impression. Hermann believed that a disregard for the norms of conduct may eventually cascade into more profound matters.

Under his jacket, Howard wore a dark-blue, fashionable dress shirt whose open collar betrayed the fact that ties were not his "cup of tea." The silver Omega watch on his left wrist was designed to be conservatively chic, leaving an impression with those in the know. Hermann, who knew a thing or two about watches, both for their role in his national culture and as part of his daily business with men of wealth, recognized that this was one of the more expensive models, belonging to the premium series of the elite brand. Everything about Howard exuded money - a lot of it - down to his bespoke leather shoes.

Hermann sized him up: a businessman, relatively young but not too young to lack experience, a self-made man who appreciated the value of hard-earned money and was, therefore, cautious in his decisions. The new suit, the watch, and the fine shoes all suggested financial success (thus proving he understood the importance of making an impression among the international banking executives). On a personal level, Hermann deemed him as lacking in good taste. No wonder, he thought, considering the culture he came from. The man was an American, so-called "born and raised," a man who knew and appreciated the benefits of money, yet was careful not to draw attention to his wealth.

Bottom line, for all intents and purposes - C&S would find this man's money a worthy investment. Hermann was pleased to conclude that his precious time was well spent. He was determined to turn this potential client

into an active account.

“Mr. Howard, I believe you met one of our relationship managers in New York?”

“Yes, Herr Hermann, it was your bank that first approached me suggesting you can provide an interesting investment opportunity generating returns that US investment firms were unable to deliver on a conservative portfolio -”

“Indeed, and then you met with my colleague.”

“Yes, it was rather odd...”

“Odd?”

“You operate a branch in New York, don’t you?”

“Not exactly a branch. We have a representative office serving our East Coast clients.”

“Okay. So what I found odd was that your representative suggested we meet at a restaurant in Manhattan -”

“Ah, I see. You expected to meet in our office?”

“Yes, that’s customary, especially for an introductory meeting.”

“Well, let me share a little secret with you. We’re very protective of our clients’ privacy,” he lowered his voice in a conspiratorial tone, “even of our potential clients. I’m sure you understand what I mean.”

Howard wanted to ensure that he did, indeed, understand what the banker was alluding to. “You believe American citizens interested in your services are being followed? Is that what you’re implying?”

“Let’s just say - better safe than sorry,” the banker agreed without going into detail. “Privacy and confidentiality are key to our clients and therefore are our highest priority. Let me further add that the fact that you came here today reflects your appreciation of our methods and I can assure you that we will always protect your interests.”

“Well, I came to your beautiful city on another business matter and thought that, if I was already here, I might as well take the opportunity to meet with you.”

Yes, of course... still being careful... but not for long.

After exchanging these words, Howard fell silent and his eyes wandered toward the ceiling, waiting for the banker's response.

Hermann did not disappoint. “I sense you are still hesitant, Mr. Howard.” His voice dropped to an intimate tone. “Let me reassure you that C&S Group's absolute and uncompromising loyalty is entirely at your discretion. I highly recommended that you share your uncertainties with me. Feel at ease to communicate your expectations and any of your concerns. You are protected under Swiss banking secrecy laws, meaning that everything said in this room will never be repeated anywhere, nor to anyone. That is our pledge to you.”

Howard shook his head in disquiet, his eyes darting around the room as if he was worried someone might be listening to their conversation. But there was nothing to uncover. The conference room was bare except for a round glass table and two matching designer chairs in a minimalist style. The tabletop was bare and clear of any objects. The walls were painted white and devoid of any paintings or decoration. The massive door was closed, as if to clearly indicate that any conversations held in this room could not be overheard from the outside. This unique, understated design was certainly not coincidental and was intended for a very specific purpose. It was meant to discourage any thoughts that the conversations held in this room could leak out. Paintings and furniture, in general, had the potential for concealing surveillance cameras and recording devices and the best way to demonstrate that they did not exist was to present a bare, transparent room, lacking the capacity to conceal such devices.

“There’s one thing that concerns me, Herr Hermann,” Howard began hesitantly. “Suppose I open an account with your bank... must I report it in my country? I’m not familiar with the regulations.”

The banker smiled to himself without a trace of expression to betray his thoughts. He had heard this question before, in various forms.

“And to whom do you think you must report?” he asked casually.

The man hesitated for a moment. “Perhaps my accountant?”

“And, John - may I call you John?” Hermann lowered his voice and assumed a personal tone. “Do you want your accountant to know of this account?”

“Honestly?” A thin smile escaped Howard’s lips for the first time since he had entered the room. “Not particularly. Not if I’m not obligated to do so. And I suppose that if I do report it to my accountant, then he’ll be bound to declare the funds in this account when he files my statement of net worth, correct?”

Ah, the cat was finally out of the bag.

Hermann sat up in his chair and took on a practical expression. “Look, my friend,” he began, “allow me to be forthcoming. I’m sure you didn’t fly all the way from New York just so that various individuals, or authorities, could be privy to your financial affairs... I’m certain this topic was also discussed in your conversation with my colleague who advised you to contact us here.” He paused for a moment to let his words sink in. “I can assure you that your assets will be protected from inquisitive eyes and remain for your eyes only. Our first and only fiduciary duty is to you as our client. We can offer you a numbered account that does not disclose your personal information. In addition, we will provide you with guidelines for transferring any funds you wish

to this account without leaving a paper trail or raising suspicion from anyone interested in such information - and this includes everyone, especially your local tax authorities. Have I made myself perfectly clear, John?"

Howard nodded in agreement and his posture indicated that the tension he was under had now largely dissipated.

"What figure did you have in mind?" the banker asked.

"A million dollars? At first, I mean..."

"A reasonable amount, but since you say 'at first,' then I gather that the potential is even greater?"

"Yes, but I'd rather take it in my stride, familiarize myself with the process, appraise the situation -"

"As far as the bank is concerned, that's perfectly acceptable," Hermann leaned forward, his gaze penetrating the eyes of the man in front of him. "But I must note that this sum falls in the range of our minimum threshold and therefore will not accrue any interest. Meaning that, despite our aspiration to uphold our capitalist values," the banker's lips curled bitterly as if taking personal offense on behalf of the ill-treated funds, "your money will not work for you. However, once you increase your investment to an excess of \$5 million, we can offer you various options for graduated returns based on your balance."

"What kind of returns? Let's say for five million?"

"Three percent annually, a very handsome return at today's rates, especially for a risk-free investment."

"And if I wish to withdraw funds? What are the conditions?" Howard's voice was now in negotiation mode, signaling Hermann that he was on the right track to achieving his goal.

"I suggest a revolving two-year term deposit. Of course, you will have an option to withdraw any sum before maturity, though the interest, unfortunately, will

be deducted. But John, rest assured that withdrawing your money will not be necessary. In case of any need, we can provide you with an immediate loan of up to 25% of the amount accrued in your account at an interest rate as low as 1.5%. Therefore, whatever the circumstances, you will receive a positive return of at least 1.5%. Tax-free, of course.”

Howard mulled this over in his head.

“John, was I correct in suggesting a term deposit? Are we discussing a long- to medium-term investment?”

“Yes, you’re correct, Herr Hermann. This is, indeed, meant to be a long-term deposit, a savings account for a rainy day. In my sort of business, it’s easy to fall under the illusion that money will always be in abundance. Money always comes in and comes out, but if you don’t set something aside, you might wake up one day to find _”

“Well said,” Hermann was set to strike. “John, if we’re talking about a long-term commitment, and considering you’re relatively young, your \$5 million investment, under the terms we offer, will be worth approximately \$7.5 million in 20 years. A 50% return, at no risk, and a handsome sum toward your retirement.”

As always, the numbers sold the deal.

“Okay, Herr Hermann, what do I need to do?”

The banker smiled, “Excellent decision, John. Let’s proceed with the details. Where is the money currently held?”

CHAPTER 1

March 15, 2018, Tel Aviv, Israel

The closed drapes and fastened shutters blocked the sunlight from flooding the room. A small, low-voltage nightlight on the bedside table cast a yellowish glow across the dying woman's deformed face.

A clear plastic tube ran from her nose, around her head to the oxygen machine, which generated a monotonous hum in the corner of the room. This was the only sound in the otherwise silent room. The pump pushing oxygen into the frail lungs served an essential task as the acute pulmonary edema no longer allowed for spontaneous breathing. A monitor at the side of the bed displayed the heart-rate. Her heart, unlike the rest of the body gripped by paralysis, was strong, as if to indicate that, although the other systems were collapsing, the heart would not yield.

A stranger looking in would have thought that this was an ICU in a modern hospital, rather than a bedroom in a modest apartment converted to a new purpose with a substantial financial investment.

The bedroom door opened with a faint creak. The woman, half-conscious, was not aware of her husband as he entered the room and shut the door behind him. Elijah Levi, a gaunt man in his fifties, his face lined with wrinkles and his graying hair brushed to one side,

returned from his long workday at the main branch of GCB where he served as a senior clerk in the Retail Banking Checking Department. He nodded hello to the nurse sitting by the bed as she rose and came toward him. In a hushed voice, she related that the day had gone well and that the patient was peaceful and calm. This was to be expected since paralysis had already overtaken most of the muscles and the woman's nourishment was based on fluids. The man, his face composed, thanked the nurse in a quiet, half-whisper, and moved toward the chair at the side of the bed. As the nurse stepped out and shut the door behind her, he reached over to gently stroke the woman's face. The hard lines of his face softened for a moment as compassion flooded him, replacing the profound sadness that had overtaken him in the past months. The delicate touch of his hand caused the woman's eyelids to flutter and she slowly opened her eyes. As she recognized her husband's face, her eyes brightened in a smile, the rest of her face frozen in paralysis. But he noticed the smile that shone from her eyes and, for the first time since he'd entered the room, a warm smile spread across his face. Smiles were few and far between, occurring only during the few moments his wife was conscious and gazing at his face with infinite gratitude.

For some time now, Elijah Levi's world had been split in two. On the one side, he stood alongside his wife, bound together as one unit. On the other side stood all who had let him down. Those who had abandoned him were considered the enemy. And one must fight one's enemies. *À la guerre comme à la guerre* – in war, the ends justify the means.

Elijah Levi gently drew his hand away from his

wife's face. The effort to keep her eyes open was beyond her frail ability and she fell back into a dim semi-consciousness. His eyes wandered to the clock on the wall. The daily routine never failed in its cruel precision. For the next three hours, he would sit in this chair, holding his wife's motionless hand. During this time, he would attend to her every breath and moan while his thoughts wandered to the situation they had gotten themselves involved in and everything that must be done. He would later follow the usual nighttime protocol and lie on the sofa across from her bed. When his mind finally eased, he would fall into a restless sleep, precarious as the flutter of a butterfly's wings, in a futile attempt to find some rest among her intermittent groans.

As he sat holding her hand, his thoughts, which had unsettled his entire being lately, flooded over him. He had no illusions. It was not a question of "if" but a question of "when." He knew for certain that his embezzlement would not remain concealed for long and, when they realized what he had done, he would have to pay the price. It would be a substantial price, a penalty disproportionate to the usual white-collar offenses. After all, the banking sector was considered taboo, the apple in the eyes of politicians and courts. The Israeli legal system had always feared the chaos that might occur if the banking sector ever found itself in a real predicament, and the actions that he, Elijah Levi, had recently committed were nothing less than a direct blow to the stability of the system. Therefore, they would make an example of his case as a deterrent to any future would-be perpetrator, with added years for any additional offense they could justify. Then the only sky he would see, for years to come, would be through the iron bars of his prison cell.

A gloomy and disturbing future.

Only Elijah Levi, contrary to what could be

expected, was not afraid. Ideology had no price, and ideology drove his actions.

For some time now, a dark, powerful rage had been growing inside him. It was fueled by his wife's bitter fate and heightened by the cruelty and callousness of the bank and its executives, betraying him when he needed them most. The various federal institutions incited an even greater fury by collecting his taxes all these years, yet ignoring and trampling on the rights he had earned. Those who hurt him easily hid behind the smokescreen created by the term "institutions." They used the term as an excuse to launder their ineptitude and the injustices they had facilitated.

Toward those cruel cowards, he felt a murderous rage for their actions had compelled him to stray from the values he had upheld his entire life. He blamed them for turning him into an embezzler. He blamed their obtuseness and indifference for his downward spiral to the lowest rungs of morality – a place that someone entrusted with the public's funds should never reach. He blamed them for forcing him into a cruel predicament: to helplessly accept his dying wife's terrible suffering, or to boldly cross all the lines in an attempt to ease her pain. He was faced with grave dilemma: betray his wife or the bank. Betray a wife who had given him a lifetime of love, or betray those who had abandoned him in his hour of need? He still could not believe how, in one moment, he had become damaged goods, tossed to the side of the road.

Thus, the decision was made. He trusted the fact that he had chosen the one option that served justice, the decision that would provide his wife with the very best care money could buy until she took her final breaths. The bank would pay for everything she needed. That was the only way he could go on living with himself, the only right action that would triumph over evil. No price he

would personally have to pay would deter him. To those hypocrites who would surely fling the words “morality,” “honesty,” and “loyalty” in his face, he would reply with the words “honor,” “compassion,” and “humanity.” Was it even possible to compare a dying person’s right to proper care against the economic interests of a powerful organization that would ultimately suffer no real harm? And the injustice he had suffered? Elijah Levi had always been loyal and devoted to the system. He had always been a model employee, offering his customers the most professional and considerate service and earning the respect and appreciation of his superiors. Was he not entitled to be treated with fairness?

On that same cursed day she had been diagnosed, he realized that their world was about to shatter. The expensive treatments chipped away at their life savings with incredible speed. A lifetime of savings dissolved within months. Bills that could not be paid began to accumulate. He was facing the greatest challenge of his life with no idea what to do next.

Four months later, the symptoms worsened, leaving her paralyzed. Her speech became slow and slurred and additional muscles ceased to function. Every new day brought with it a new challenge and the need for more medical equipment and further treatments to alleviate the pain of the terminally ill patient. Their debts grew. In his desperation, he turned to loan sharks, their exorbitant interest rates leading to an even greater debt he could never repay. Through the countless hours he sat by her bedside and gazed upon her frozen face, his mind raced for a solution. What else could be done? What should he do? He was no longer fooling himself. He was left to face this alone. Every day, huge transactions passed under his watchful eye, as if to torment his desperate need for money. But none of these sums belonged to him. Nonetheless, this money pointed to a solution - a terrible

solution, the sort of solution he was always sure he would never attempt under any circumstances.

Then, unexpectedly, a defining moment occurred one evening in early February 2018. He was sitting at his wife's bedside, as he had done every day in recent months, holding her motionless hand in his hand. Suddenly she began to choke as she tried to utter words he could not understand. He would never forget how he leaned forward and pressed his ear to her mouth.

"I'm burning..." she murmured. This was the moment something inside him broke, the moment a door inside his heart slammed shut. All at once, like the swing of an ax, he resolved to put an end to the days of begging and pleading. The sudden clear, comprehension of his uniquely personal mission to make comfortable the last days of his dear wife, the person closest to him, seized him and wiped away his doubts.

Whatever the price may be.

First, he needed to find a viable solution, one that would last for at least the several months his wife had left. In a moment of clarity, he opened an account in his wife's name at the Ashdod branch of GCB bank. He added himself as a beneficiary with unlimited withdrawal rights. He then set out to search for potential targets among the accounts he managed at the Tel-Aviv main branch.

Convinced that his actions served a noble purpose, he was also certain that, ultimately, no real financial harm would befall any individual. The bank was insured against fraud and embezzlement, ensuring that any funds taken would eventually be returned. No customer would be hurt. The bank's insurance premiums may slightly increase, and that was perfectly acceptable. Nothing

would have any lasting effect on an indifferent system that racked up substantial profits every day.

The need, the justification, and the opportunity – they were all there.

And the execution? He himself was surprised by the unbearable ease of his plan. In just a few days, he was transformed from a man tumbling into a bottomless pit to a man with unlimited possibilities.

At the time, he could not imagine that fate and its unpredictable whims would provide him with valuable information - information so valuable that it would turn the tables in the most unexpected way.

CHAPTER 2

**April 3, 2018, Radisson Blu Hotel, Basel,
Switzerland**

Wolff meticulously followed the orders he had received, although he thoroughly disapproved. First, his name was not Wolff, and second, they never bothered asking him how he felt about pretending to be someone else.

“After landing in Basel, head to the Radisson Blu Hotel. To anyone who asks, you are Herr Wolff from Munich,” they’d said as if it was all just a trivial matter for him. The only saving grace in having to present himself under a false name was that it was just a made-up persona and not a matter of identity theft. After all, he was not a member of some clandestine shadow organization. In fact, he was the exact opposite. He was a senior banker in a large bank, perhaps the largest in Israel, and the banking sector frowned upon any attempt to impersonate someone else. But the alias was not the only thing that bothered him. The man at the other end of the line, who had introduced himself as Rudolf, a senior administrative assistant at C&S Banking Group, insisted that he must strictly follow all instructions upon his arrival in Basel. Again, these were strange – disturbing, even. He was used to an expense account as part of his frequent business travels and felt the natural thing to do would be to hail a taxi to take him from

Mulhouse Freiburg Airport to the Radisson Blu. However, it turned out that Rudolf was not interested in “the natural thing to do.” He insisted that he take a bus to the Basel Theater and then proceed to the hotel on foot. “It’s less than a five minutes’ walk at a leisurely pace,” he assured him, without allowing any further protest. But - a bus? He could not remember the last time he had set foot on a bus. When he had tried to question the plan, the line went silent, as if the caller was trying to determine if his behavior was due to a certain naiveté or pure insolence. The laconic response assured him that all would become clear later on. At the end of the brief conversation, if one could even call a list of instructions a conversation, the man recommended that he pack an umbrella and a swimsuit. The umbrella was clear enough, perhaps a necessary item for a walk on a spring day in Basel. The swimsuit, however, was an enigma. But this time, he managed to stop himself from asking for an explanation. With so much mystery surrounding him, he would just have to wait and see.

The most plausible explanation was that all these instructions were designed to maintain confidentiality. This was why he needed to pose as Herr Wolff from Munich and arrive at the meeting in such a peculiar way. His only consolation was that pretending to be German (he preferred to think of it as ‘acting’ German) was not going to pose a problem for him. He was of German descent. He had the right look and had adequate control of the German language, which was his mother’s native tongue.

Either way, he simply accepted the peculiar demands because when you were summoned out of nowhere and without any explanation to meet a senior C&S director, you did exactly as you were told.

This summons, the more he thought about it, was verging on surreal. He was way out of his league. True,

he was not an unknown in the world of international banking. His name and position appeared on every website detailing senior executives in charge of international banking operations, but he still had to wonder. Nonetheless, having verified all the necessary credentials and convinced himself that this was not a hoax or fraud, he had to consider the other possibility.

What if this was the opportunity of a lifetime? His one shot to fulfill an incredible dream?

At least the timing and location fit his busy schedule. It was the spring holidays, he had some vacation time planned and the luxurious Radisson Blu was ideally suited to his taste.

A masseuse was waiting for him at the hotel reception, instructing him to head to the saunas at the hotel spa. The mystery of the swimsuit had been solved.

He descended a spiral staircase to the lower floor where he was greeted by the spa attendant sporting a distant and efficient Swiss smile. After a brief and professional review of the facilities, she asked, “How does Herr Wolff prefer to pay?” Instead of instinctively pulling out his platinum card, he stayed true to the plan and took out several 50-franc notes from his wallet. He understood the name of the game – anonymity. And that included avoiding a credit card paper trail disclosing information to inquisitive eyes.

With a complimentary bathrobe, towel, and white terrycloth slippers in hand, he passed through the spa relaxation area with its inviting armchairs and sofas. A glance at the large clock on the wall indicated that the designated time had come, so he did not stop at the refreshments table laden with bottles of spring water, tea infusions, and healthy snacks. Instead, he headed directly

to the changing rooms, undressed, and placed his bag and clothes in the locker. Then, wearing his bathing trunks and terrycloth robe, he walked through the door leading to the treatment rooms. He immediately noticed the saunas located on the far side of the jet hot tubs.

Although he had never met this director, he was certain he would recognize him. In international banking, Max Frisch was no less famous than a head of state. But how would Frisch recognize him? This was still a mystery, which he assumed would soon be resolved. Once again, he feared that this was nothing more than a hoax... but it was a fleeting thought.

The two saunas were located to the left of the pool. He pulled open the first door and peered inside. Three women and two men were sprawled on the benches indulging in the hot air. He closed the door and turned to the second. He immediately saw the man he came to meet sitting alone on a large white towel. Unbelievable. The great Max Frisch himself.

Frisch glanced at him and motioned to him with a slight nod. Another mystery solved.

He nodded back with a quick smile and stepped back to hang his robe next to two others that were already hanging on the wall. He filled a glass of water from a nearby cooler and, remembering that someone had once told him that one does not enter a sauna wearing slippers, he left them outside the door and entered barefoot. A sudden blast of heat enveloped him, taking his breath away for a moment. Max Frisch wiped large beads of the sweat from his face with a small towel and, with a gesture of his hand, beckoned him to sit on the bench beside him. He did not reach out to shake his hand but offered a curt greeting in German.

How predictable, Wolff mused.

He was expecting some form of introduction. After all, they were complete strangers. The term “ice breaker”

came to mind and then an amusing thought of breaking ice in a hot sauna brought an inadvertent smile to his face. But he soon realized this was not that kind of meeting. His smile faded quickly as Frisch, not even turning to face him, stared straight ahead at the hourglass with its slowly trickling sand. Frisch stated his offer in five direct and precise sentences. His words left no room for confusion. He then wiped his brow again and demanded a reply.

Yes or no. Now or never.

Wolff realized that this offer would expire as soon as the last grain of sand in the hourglass dropped through and that this was bound to occur at any moment.

His mind raced. The temptation was too great, but so was the risk. If he agreed, his bank would receive a very profitable deal. Such a profit would be reflected in his annual bonus as per his employment contract.

Wolff was a quick-thinking professional. He immediately understood that Max Frisch had made this offer in order to distance himself and his bank from any incriminating evidence. Furthermore, he suspected that an investigation against C&S was already being conducted by the Swiss authorities or even by certain international entities.

And there was another disturbing consideration. Why did Frisch choose to turn specifically to him, of all the bankers in the world? An odd choice... or perhaps not so odd. Should he assume that Frisch knew things about him that he had never revealed to anyone? Those very things he was sure were buried so deep that they could never be uncovered? If he was being realistic for a moment, logic held that this assumption was correct. Whoever chose to summon him here was certain that, even if he rejected this proposal, which certainly smelled like trouble, there was no danger of him disclosing its details. If he made any such attempt, he knew they could use against him some information that he once thought

was well hidden. That information would send him away for a very long time.

Nonetheless, he was somewhat comforted knowing they were well aware of who they were dealing with. There was no longer a need for masks and pretense.

So where, essentially, was the risk? Could an investigation possibly reveal a connection between two random banks on different continents? Assuming, of course, that everything was well-planned and confidential? And what were the chances that the Central Bank regulators would discover any wrongdoing? At least when it came to the Israeli regulators, he reassured himself, the risk was negligible. He knew only too well that the “gatekeepers” meant to supervise the banking sector often navigated blindly in a maze. After all, this would not be the first time he’d outwit them. Besides, it was well known that, even if they did uncover something, they tended to turn a blind eye. After all, their personal path to prosperity depended on their subsequent integration in the commercial banking sector after they purportedly supervised it. As for his bank’s internal regulation, well, he would just have to make sure everything was under his control. After all, he wasn’t exactly surrounded by geniuses.

There was no chance without risk. If it wasn’t risky, he wouldn’t have been invited here. On the other hand, trying to see the glass half-full, Swiss banking discretion was on his side. Despite certain cracks in recent years, it was still considered extremely reliable. Therefore, it would not be unreasonable to think that this risk could be managed successfully, cautiously, prudently, and in the hope that luck would be on his side...

He wiped away the beads of sweat that had begun to drip from his face. There was just one question left to ask.

What would he get out of all of this?

He quickly learned that this was a perfectly legitimate question, as Frisch was prepared with an offer. The sum thrown into the hot sauna air made his head spin. For a moment he was sure he was about to faint. It was an outrageous amount of money that could be all his for the taking. He was suddenly sourly reminded of a blatantly illegal transaction he once conceived for the ruler of a war-torn African country. Back then, in a moment of optimism, which later turned out to be completely unrealistic, the general had promised him a generous sum, only the general was murdered before he managed to fulfill his promise. But this was Switzerland... *vive la différence*... He was confident that a secret account in his name would be credited with the full sum exactly as agreed.

He sipped some water to ensure his voice was as steady and calm as possible, glanced at the hourglass as the last grains of sand slid their way down, and said,

“Deal.”

A faint smile of satisfaction crossed Max Frisch’s round face. Wolff responded with a wide grin of his own in the direction of the large man’s perspiring profile and hoped that his quick resolve conveyed that he was ready for the big league.

Frisch, whose tone of voice now softened as if the tension in him had dissipated, explained that, from now on, all matters would be conducted through conventional banking channels. His respected colleague could expect his bank to receive an official proposal in the upcoming days. It was imperative that the proposal was approved.

Of course... he’d take care of it.

“Is Herr Wolff planning to extend his stay in Basel?” he asked.

“No. Just one night, sir. My flight leaves tomorrow.”

“Excellent. Then perhaps Herr Wolff should not stay at the Radisson Blu tonight. Will that be a problem?”

“No problem.” He’d figured that part out on his own.

“Well then, enjoy your day in our beautiful Basel, Herr Wolff,” said Max Frisch, rising from his towel and heading for the door.

Wolff managed to murmur a thank you and nod a farewell to the man who had already pushed the sauna door open and walked away. Wolff rose slowly and stepped up to the top bench where the temperature was hottest. He lay down on his back and closed his eyes.

He had just attended a meeting that never really happened. Then his thoughts wandered to the money. So much money. All his. A broad, irrepressible smile spread across his face.

Max Frisch walked along the poolside and into the men’s changing room. A man in his early 40s with an athletic build and a stiff jawline stood by one of the open lockers and gazed at the door. He wore a blue tracksuit and held a small sports bag in his hand. The two men exchanged glances. Frisch gave a slight shake of his head. The man nodded in agreement, shut the locker door, and walked out of the changing room.

Meanwhile, the man calling himself Wolff indulged in the hot sauna, entirely unaware that his agreement to the terms of Frisch’s deal had prevented his life from coming to a sudden and unexpected end. “Life according to Max Frisch” had only two possibilities: you were either a partner, or a potential witness for the prosecution... and witnesses were a risk Max Frisch could not afford.

Wolff checked out of the Radisson Blu and returned to his true identity, a senior manager at GCB, considered

by most to be the largest commercial bank in Israel. He breathed in the clear, crisp Swiss air and thought of the line he had just crossed. There was so much to gain. Cold drops of rain began falling and he raised his head to look at the gray, overcast sky. For a moment, he wondered if the sky was lamenting his choice, but then he smiled cynically, dismissing the silly, superstitious thought. He never did believe in such things. He took cover under his umbrella and began organizing his thoughts.

In his mind, he took a quick inventory of the betrayals his decision had just initiated. First betrayal - his bank. Worst case scenario, his actions would set the bank back by years. They may even bring about its collapse. Bile rose in his throat as he pondered the repercussions of a bank's collapse. It was not just a bank within a country, it was a bank that maintained a country. Thus, the impact of his actions would not stop at just the bank but would extend onward. On a more personal note, he had betrayed his colleagues, the bank's managing directors and its CEO, whose careers would end in one fell swoop, forever branded with disgrace.

But these were empty thoughts and he forced them out of his head, returning to the here and now. Up until a short while ago, when he was still Herr Wolff, he had a fantasy that could still be fulfilled. He expected to pamper himself while in this picturesque city as soon as the meeting with Frisch was over. He already imagined a luxurious suite with a river view, two or three fine French-themed meals, and the crowning glory – the indulgence of a pampering massage from a shamefully beautiful young woman three decades his junior, but experienced enough to know what a man really needed, unlike the local women back home. But now, after his meeting with Frisch, he had to put this fantasy on hold. He no longer had the time or even the desire. Luckily, he reminded himself, life's pleasures were not going

anywhere. They would always be there when he wanted them. For now, the only important thing was the deal. The deal had reorganized all his priorities. From this moment on, he would devote all his time to arranging the pawns on the game board that fate had laid before him. He believed only a few would be able to recognize what was really important, to separate the wheat from the chaff. A substantial fortune, larger than he could ever imagine, rested on the scales, against a terrifyingly great risk - a risk that, if realized, would mean losing everything.

It was all or nothing. The peak of the mountain or the bottom of the deepest pit.

Just one day after Wolff landed back in Israel, he was surprised to discover that the numbered account opened on his behalf by Frisch's efficient and long-reaching arm had been credited with \$10 million. At first, the enormous sum made his adrenaline rush and his mood soar, allowing him a momentary escape from the risks involved. He had not expected Frisch to hold up to his end of the deal so quickly after that meeting that never took place at the Radisson Blu. There were even moments when he doubted whether this deal would indeed come to fruition. But, as his eyes adjusted to the number on the screen, the promptness of this transaction only reinforced what he had suspected in the first place. There was no doubt that C&S was already feeling a sense of impending danger.

Now that the sum had been credited to his account, he knew that lines had been crossed and there was no turning back. \$10 million was a massive sum, large enough, he wanted to believe, to compensate for a long

prison sentence if things went south... but why be pessimistic? He had already proven his knack for evading bad luck in the past. After all, in a world of uncertainty, there was always a viable chance that he would be able to keep the money and slip under the radar unscathed.

That very day, he transferred the money from his C&S account. Promptness was definitely a two-way game. He undertook a series of transactions that challenged even his professional abilities and experience. He bounced the money across four continents and through several different banks before depositing it in a numbered account in the Virgin Islands. Ten minutes after emptying his C&S account, he tried to access it again but came across an automatic error message: "Account does not exist." Another indication of Max Frisch's powerful reach.

The next step was to ensure that no one else would have access to his new account and to guarantee that under no circumstances would it be possible to reveal that he was the account beneficiary. He needed an unbreakable password. Such passwords were created by anonymous hackers on the dark web. He paid for a complex, two-part password whose creator guaranteed, albeit only against his anonymous word, that it was of the highest encryption level. Only by combining the two password parts in a specific way could the account be accessed, much like the two keys required to open a safety deposit box, only a thousand times more sophisticated. It was the latest word in cybersecurity, considered, at least for now, to be completely reliable. It ensured that the owner of the account would remain anonymous forever.

All he had to do now was wait for C&S to approach his bank with their official proposal to transfer a portfolio of accounts to GCB's investment management. The portfolio would include, among the various

legitimate accounts, those same accounts that C&S sought to conceal. The portfolio would have to be approved by an Investment Committee and by the bank's Executive Vice President, who also headed the Investment Division. The Investment Committee was a source of potential trouble and was, therefore, to be avoided. It regularly convened every two weeks, so he would have to time the C&S proposal to one day after the committee convened. In such a case, the VP would be required to approve the deal or wait an additional two weeks at the risk of losing it. Familiar with the parties involved, he knew that the substantial portfolio would be too valuable to risk losing. He then assessed with a high degree of certainty that the VP would approve the deal and seek the committee's ratification or approval in retrospect. Nothing unusual, and it had happened before. The committee stage would then be nothing more than a rubber stamp without performing the necessary due diligence of the portfolio. The accounts would proceed to be handled by the bank with him monitoring behind the scenes. There would be no evidence connecting him personally with the portfolio.

And the next phase? Concealing the relevant data required manual intervention. This mission required his best clerk. It would take a skilled person, one who would be able to calculate the profit share to be transferred to C&S - but skills were not enough. It also required someone who knew who to keep a secret and keep silent like a mute. In addition, if things went wrong, this person must also be able to withstand pressures without breaking and be prepared to sacrifice himself without hesitation if necessary. This person should be undeterred by a long prison sentence, knowing a handsome compensation was waiting at the end of his term. Ultimately, this was to be a two-player game, with one

player always unseen. It seemed like an undertaking he could readily control.

However, for the time being, no such person came to mind.

Little did he know that fate was about to send him the perfect man for the job, though under almost tragic circumstances.

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