Who “Killed” Status?

HAIM FELDMAN

Who "Killed" Status?

or, Crime Without Punishment

Translated from the Russian

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Who "Killed" Status? is a book like no other. Once you have read it, you will see a great many things differently. It will open your eyes to things you never suspected.

This is not a detective novel in which a noble sleuth unmasks a cold-blooded killer who slipped poison into a wealthy aunt's tea. And yet it is a detective story, only one far closer to real life. It is the story of a single crime. What sets it apart from classic crime plots is that the crime has never been solved. The villains have not been punished; they still hold high office.

The author, Haim Feldman, wrote this book precisely so that the crime might be properly investigated and officially solved. So that the guilty might be named for all to hear. And so that crimes like it might be prevented in future.

So: in the sun-scorched land of Israel there lived and worked a company called Status Group. Its people did their jobs honestly, helping thousands of others. Then came events that shook the company to its foundations. The account of those events will shake the book's readers too. For few people know that an honest, conscientious business is not to the liking of certain forces within Israel's state machinery…

The truth about what happened to Status Group is staggering. Once you know it, you will find you can no longer live and see the world as you did before.

The author believes that what happened to his company must never happen again. That is why this book was written.

God grant that I don’t get mired in power, nor play the hero in some dishonest way; that I might be wealthy—yet never steal—if such a thing is even possible.
God grant that I be seasoned and shrewd,
never devoured by some gang or crew; to be neither a victim nor an executioner, neither a master nor a beggar.
God grant that I suffer fewer gaping wounds
when the great fray breaks out. God grant that I might see many lands—without ever losing my own.
God grant that your own country
doesn’t kick you with a heavy boot. God grant that your wife
loves you, even when you’re destitute.
(...)
God grant everything—everything, everything—
to everyone at once, so that no one feels slighted... God grant everything, but only that
for which one need never feel shame.

Yevgeny Yevtushenko, “God Grant!”, 1990

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Author's Note

Why am I writing this book?

Because I love our country. Israel is my home; it made me who I am today. I am grateful to fate for making me an Israeli.

Because for a while I was careless enough to live in the grip of an illusion. The illusion was that I did not grasp the scale of bureaucratic lawlessness within the borders of the State of Israel. I believed that ours was a democratic, civilised country. I paid a high price for that illusion. And I was not the only one.

Because I am convinced that a malignant tumour of lawlessness is eating away at the country. It will touch everyone unless people are warned in time. Many will not believe the danger is real. And many will not recover from the blows when they land. I did, but not everyone has my advantages: the strength, the character, the ability to survive in any conditions.

Because I believe I must speak about the outrages I encountered. Information is the first medicine against the disease of lawlessness, as it is against the disease of illusions.

Because I believe that all is not yet lost. I believe that if we set about treating it, the country can be saved. I believe there are honest people capable of containing the tumour and then removing it.

What am I writing this book for?

So that others do not repeat my mistake, and instead see the situation we are in for what it is, without letting illusions distort the picture.

So that certain individuals do not go unpunished: those for whom lawlessness is a way of getting what they want; those for whom the law is a trifle to be sidestepped whenever their own interests are at stake; those who to this day hold senior posts in the State of Israel, take decisions that matter to the country, and wield power over people.

To prompt Israel's law enforcement agencies to look into the information set out in this book. The state bodies whose job is to uphold the law must give the situation an official assessment, and break the chain of lies and crimes that nobody cares about.

To set in motion the processes that will help preserve the country and keep the strong, creative people who have grown disillusioned with their prospects here and are leaving Israel, or about to.

To say what Israel should fear more than external threats. We are very fond of being frightened by the Palestinian or Iranian threat. The country stands a real chance of not living long enough to see them become serious. If the malignant tumour spreads, it will destroy the body from within before any outside threat does.

An internal disease that is passed over in silence and left untreated is the more dangerous one.

I refuse to stay silent about it. That is why I am writing this book.

Prologue

Israel is probably the best country in the world. Or perhaps not. It all depends on your point of view and your own experience. For tourists it is, of course, paradise. For new immigrants, the motherland.

Either way, El Al is the best airline in the world. And Ben Gurion is the best airport, at least where security is concerned. The main thing is this: when the charming (but extremely observant!) young women from security question you in the queue for boarding, don't lie. Not that I have ever been accused of that sin, according to my friends, colleagues and clients. Not cracking jokes, though (and the observant young women do not care for jokes!), is much harder. So when asked "Who packed your suitcase?" I answered confidently that I had done it myself. But the question "Has anyone asked you to take something for them?" stirred up a whole storm of feelings. Of course they had. Experience, first and foremost. Priceless experience, which had cost me very, very dearly. But perhaps that experience might be of use to others? To you, for instance? After all, forewarned is forearmed.

I refrained from joking with security, and so fifteen minutes later I was sitting comfortably in a Boeing, gazing sadly through the window at the sun-baked taxiway. I was saying goodbye, for a while, to this beautiful land, dreaming of a swift return, and trying to understand: how had it come to this, that after giving my historic homeland a quarter of a century of my life, I was now being forced to fly away? A car with a flashing light sped

along the next taxiway, and it suddenly occurred to me: had my sworn "friends" decided to lay on some particularly nasty parting surprise? But no, it was just an ordinary airport services vehicle. So, my "friends" think they have already beaten me. Let them dream. For now.

The captain introduced himself over the intercom, and the plane crawled slowly towards the runway. I fastened my seat belt, and in that instant I knew I would write a book. This book. After all, if I have been "gifted" priceless experience, it would be a sin not to share it, wouldn't it?

I want you to know the truth about the real, the gravest threat to the State of Israel. A threat more frightening than Palestinian terrorists or Syrian shelling. The hydra of corruption, which is devouring my country and may, God forbid, swallow it whole. I will write a book about my experience so that you know the truth and can draw your own conclusions. And then I will return to the best country in the world. To my homeland. To keep fighting this hydra. I will return, without fail!

CHAPTER ONE

My Aliyah

I came to Israel as a very young man, and I fell in love with the country. It was here that I grew up and gained my first serious experience of life, and my first hardening. I "went up" in the fullest sense of the word *aliyah*, which in Hebrew means "ascent". The strength to start a business, to grow it and to fight for it came from my new country and from my family. I am a Jew through and through, and family to me is sacred: the foundation, the fertile soil. My family taught me, above all, to take a punch and to hit back. "You are nobody's punching bag" was the first motto I took to heart. Let me say a few words about my *aliyah*, because it matters.

Nobody's Punching Bag

In seventh grade I signed up for boxing.

I had been to all sorts of clubs before that, respectable ones, with no fisticuffs. Music school, the radio club, basketball, ballroom dancing. Curiosity drove me to try them all. I had no ambition to break records, but I came to understand how different sides of life worked.

And then, boxing! Without asking, without a word to anyone! *Oy vey!*

You can imagine what they said at home.

I got the medical certificate for the club on the quiet from my Aunt Bella, one of the best paediatricians in town. Aunt Bella got a dressing-down for it from my mother, who was the textbook image of a Jewish mother. The grateful sons of a great people have a joke about it: "What's the difference between a terrorist and a Jewish mother? You can negotiate with a terrorist."

And only Jews know how much of that joke is a joke, and how much is boundless love and gratitude to our mothers.

Anyway.

With Aunt Bella, as it happened, I had negotiated. The phone call that followed went like this:

"Bella, have you lost your mind? He's already had a concussion, without any boxing!"

"Gitka, calm down. Let the boy go. Let them bash his face in a bit. He'll be a man, and soon! It's good for a man. Better than ballroom dancing…"

Thank God, ours was a very close family. My father took the liveliest interest in my upbringing and was not raising his son to be a softie. From early childhood he had me running every morning. There were mornings when he practically got me out of bed for those runs with his belt. I was also into basketball and radio, and I went to the Young Paratroopers club. So nobody could call me a princess on a pea, buried in warm featherbeds and a stranger to morning exercises.

My father approved of the boxing too.

While we were growing up, my father was the load-bearing wall of the family, and he considered it his duty to make sure we never went without. A mechanical engineer's career did not strike him as especially rewarding in that respect, so he did sport professionally, took on well-paid building jobs with his friends (in those days it was called moonlighting), and worked as a photographer for the municipal consumer services and earned very good money at it.

My mother was the chief nephrologist in Kursk. She achieved everything by her own efforts, working her way up from district doctor

and intensive care physician to the city's leading specialist. Sometimes, as children, my sister Rufina and I would sit in the doctors' room at Mum's hospital: she couldn't slip away home to look after us, because seriously ill patients needed her.

I love the town where I grew up. Kursk is one of the strongholds of Russia's Black Earth belt: grain country, peasant land. The people of that land appear in the great *Tale of Igor's Campaign*. I remember the town and its people with gratitude, but everywhere, and for almost everyone, growing up brings clashes with other kids. Kursk has nothing to do with it. It happens to teenagers in Los Angeles, in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk and in Kyiv.

In my class, as in any class, there was a gang of boys who had no wish to study or obey the rules. What they wanted was to express themselves by picking on anyone who was different. I'm not sure what single word to use for them. Hooligans? Not really, all boys get up to mischief, I did too… From troubled homes? Not really, their parents seemed normal enough… Trouble, in a word.

Trouble for me above all. From about fourth to seventh grade, they were my problem.

My mother always used to say: "You must be proud of being a Jew. We are the chosen people. You are the great-grandson of a famous rabbi." Under Stalin, my mother's grandfather was arrested and then exiled to Siberia for teaching Jews the Torah and the Law at a time when everyone was supposed to be godless. Even in the most Soviet of Soviet years, my grandparents celebrated every Jewish holiday at home. Celebrate them they did, but it was not the done thing to talk about it. I, on the other hand, would turn up at school with my Hanukkah money and brag loudly, something like: "Look, if you all had Hanukkah, you'd get this much money too!"

My character, like any teenager's, was prickly and stubborn. They had asked me at home not to shout about Hanukkah from the rooftops… So that little gang who wanted to be the toughest of all found it easy to latch on to me. Once or twice they called me a "Yid face". I went for them, and

they hit back. That was how the feud took shape and ripened. My Jewishness was not the main thing. The main thing was my awkward, uncompromising nature.

My father kept out of my scrapes at school, because I never complained. And he felt I was doing the right thing. If anyone hurt Rufina, he said, he would come and stand up for the girl. But a boy would never become a man if his father sorted out his teenage quarrels for him.

So I understood that not becoming a punching bag was my task and mine alone. It was my first step towards realising that I had to rely on my own strength. I had to stop being the bag and become the boxer, in both senses. Hence my choice of club, to my mother's horror. All the more so since in the upper grades I was skinny and unremarkable. But at least I turned out to be wiry and tough, thanks to my father's runs, to basketball and to boxing.

I didn't go for long. About six months. It was enough to master a few basic punches: I wasn't aiming to become the next Muhammad Ali, I just wanted to be able to defend myself. Once or twice I managed to give the bullies a response that may not have been brilliant but was perfectly respectable. And they never touched me again.

From my earliest years, I did not want to be like the "Jewish mummy's boy" of the jokes and songs. It is a common cliché, and it very rarely matches reality.

Jewish sons, raised by loving and self-sacrificing, if somewhat fussing, Jewish mothers and fathers, mostly turn out to be strong and worthy people. There are plenty of examples in history, and in literature too: in Babel, Sholem Aleichem, Isaac Bashevis Singer.

What's Better for a Jew: A Dog or Vodka?

The older I got, the plainer a simple thought became to me: there is little in life that is impossible; everything depends on you. Ever since I was small, I had one dream: I wanted a dog. I was refused very little, but a dog was out of the question, just like the little boy in Astrid Lindgren's

Karlsson-on-the-Roof. Then came my first exams, at the end of eighth grade. All year I had only just scraped through in the subjects I was due to sit, with middling marks at best. Not out of stupidity, but out of laziness and boyish slackness.

And suddenly, somewhere in the middle of spring, I was told: "Make an effort, son, get top marks in every exam, and then we'll talk about a dog. Bet you can't?"

"Me? Can't?!" I said to myself. And I didn't let myself down. I can't remember ever losing myself in anything like that again. I sat down with my books, borrowed my sister's notes (where would a scatterbrain like me have got notes of his own?), and by the exams I had mastered every subject required, as they used to say in pre-revolutionary Russia, "to perfection".

I proudly presented my certificate to the family.

And do you know what the real point of this story is?

It isn't the dog. I still wasn't allowed one: my mother begged for mercy, because she turned out to be allergic to pet hair. They even told me honestly that this was the main reason they hadn't got a dog all those years. They had promised me one at last only to spur me on. Nobody believed I could get top marks across the board, so they dangled a prize that was plainly out of reach.

It was the first time I acted on the motto the Israeli army would later drum into me: everything is possible, it's all in your head. A little idealistic, perhaps, but a great motivator.

My childhood dream of a dog came true when I was already a businessman. Belka is a golden retriever: independent, kind and utterly devoted. I like to joke that there is only one real person in our house: Belka…

After eighth grade I left school altogether for a building and installation technical college. There the situation was the mirror image of school. My friend Mishka and I were two Jews among gentiles, but in our group we became the leaders. It wasn't merely that nobody thought of beating us up: we were honestly and unanimously elected class monitor and Komsomol

organiser. Presumably they reckoned a Jew would be better at counting money: as class monitor, I was responsible for paying out the grants.

But one day something happened that showed it wasn't even about the grants. We were simply a bit more grown-up by then, and we had carried ourselves the right way.

The college sent us off to a collective farm. We managed not to feud with the locals but to cooperate fruitfully. Specifically, we played football with them. Since the locals considered it wrong to play just for the sake of it, we played for stakes. In keeping with our idea of being grown-up, the stake was vodka: the winning team got a bottle.

We played better, and it was hard to drink all the vodka our victories earned us. We were only sixteen, after all. The winnings piled up in Mishka's kitbag, and that is where one of the college's teachers found the booze. For the outrageous crime of concealing vodka among his personal belongings, my friend was stripped of his grant for the coming semester.

Mishka, fined in hard cash, had in effect taken the blame for all of us: he simply had the biggest kitbag. So I called on the group to chip in every month and make up the grant he had lost. Not a soul objected. Everyone thought it entirely fair, and I suspect that my authority and the Komsomol organiser's played their part too.

In fact, my decision to go to a technical college after eighth grade had caused my family some anxiety as well. I coped with the school curriculum without difficulty, apart from being lazy. And everyone remembers that the ones who left after eighth grade for technical colleges were usually the dim, the troubled and the rowdy. I had simply wanted, as I often did, to see life from yet another angle and to learn something useful. Along the way I learned a great deal about human relationships, the laws of leadership, and the ups and downs of friendship and companionship.

Thank you to all my first mentors for the life experience and the will to win. School and the boxing club first pushed me towards the thought that not everything in the world is plain sailing, that not everyone around you is obliged to love you, and that, for all that, you must never become a punching bag. The technical college, and growing up, proved that there is

no point in going to pieces, or in waiting for someone else to solve your problems for you.

Life would keep teaching me that: in a new country, foreign to me at first; in the armed forces of the State of Israel; in business; in my dealings with state bodies.

But first came emigration.

Zionism the Hard Way

And there it was before us: our new homeland. Unfamiliar, strange. Palm trees, the sea, terrible heat. Everything completely different from home. A foreign language. And I was only seventeen.

A bit frightening at first, of course.

I suppose we could have been called true Zionists.

That is, people whose aim in life is to settle in the Promised Land and do it as much good as possible. The good for themselves will follow automatically.

Zionism as an ideology was formulated, as we know, by an Austro-Hungarian Jew, Theodor Herzl. His idea boils down to this: Jews all over the world will be best off in a state of their own, because in other states they somehow seem to get in everyone's way. Herzl, incidentally, invited non-Jews into that home too, if they wished to come and undertook to behave decently.

So Zionists are not people who think Jews are better and more important than everyone else. They are people who pack up their belongings and leave for their historic homeland, saying: "Thank you all for your hospitality, but my home is over there."

That, roughly, is why my family left.

This was the late eighties. *Perestroika* was only just gathering pace. The surfeit of freedom combined with a shortage of food had not yet begun; in the nineties it would crush Russia's citizens and turn many penniless public-sector workers into petty traders in whatever came to hand. On the whole we lived well, because nobody in our family ever sat

idle. As a child I had everything I needed (I was the youngest, after all!), problems got solved, and any situation in life somehow got smoothed over. Naturally, my parents had a very wide circle of connections. You could say we were the Soviet elite. But it was precisely then, in the late eighties, that the idea of "a future in the historic homeland" took hold of the Jewish community. Those were probably the years that gave birth to the joke about a Jew who butts into a conversation between strangers: "I've no idea what you're talking about, but we have to leave, we have to leave!" So everyone left, because getting out of the old Soviet Union had become easier. Friends talked friends into it and lured them away; relatives did the same to relatives. Of course, a good many people left in pursuit of a dream of foreign prosperity and well-stocked shelves. But in fairness it has to be said that at that time many Jews suddenly felt their Jewishness keenly.

They truly wanted, and I say this without a drop of sarcasm, a home of their own, the one Theodor Herzl had imagined back at the end of the nineteenth century.

And then *glasnost* burst out in full force! How much former Soviet citizens learned about their country "with an unpredictable past", about its leaders past and present, about the dismal state of the economy, about the catastrophic decay of vital spheres: medicine, education, the army!

That last one worried my family in particular. For I was soon to be called up into that army, and all one heard about at the time was the depravity there, the brutal hazing of recruits, officers' arbitrary rule and abuse of every kind. The novella *A Hundred Days Before the Order* and the feature film *The Guard* added fuel to the fire. Everyone was genuinely frightened, mothers most of all.

The very idea of dodging the draft was born somewhere around those years. In the Soviet Union everyone used to go and serve and fear nothing, even though the notorious hazing was a child of the late sixties. I suppose my family was worried both by the army's problems described above and by my particular way of looking at the world. You will have gathered from what I've written so far that I was no angel. My mother would not have

been a Jewish mother if she hadn't worried about how I would fare in that army with a character like mine. That thought, together with another, "why shouldn't we Jews go and live among Jews?", is probably what settled our decision to move to the Promised Land.

For us it was not at all a "land flowing with milk and honey". Quite the opposite: life there was no honey. We had to start all over again, and that is not a figure of speech. A comfortable flat, long-standing jobs, a familiar circle of friends: all left behind in Kursk. Besides, we were leaving the Soviet Union. The democratic upheaval and the dissolution of the USSR came only a year after we left. At the time capitalism had not yet been declared; you could not sell your flat or take any significant sum of money with you. My parents had been people of standing in Kursk, but in the new country, like fresh graduates, they had to prove they could be of use. After twenty years as a doctor and the position of the city's chief specialist, my mother had to requalify.

My father started out watering lawns, then took a retraining course for engineers and found work in the field he had studied at university but had hardly ever worked in back in the Union. I had to look for unskilled work and often earned less than the legal minimum wage.

And yet we were grateful to our new homeland. It taught us Hebrew for free, gave us the chance to find work and learn a trade. I myself would later make my way into that very business and succeed in it. There will be a long, and sadly not a cheerful, account of my company's fate later on.

For now, we began by learning the language of King David: new to us, quaint, and not in the least related to Russian. But in those days I was more taken with hanging out with Russian-speaking friends my own age and roaming about at night, as a young lad should. The classes at the *ulpan*, the Hebrew school for immigrants, bored me.

Hebrew vowel points, construct states and verb patterns quickly wore me out, and I slept shamelessly through lessons.

Then my mother made enquiries about where in this country one could place an original like me. She was advised to try a boarding school on an army base that trained technicians for the military, where nobody was

allowed to sleep in class and discipline was military. I had very nearly started studying like a human being when I landed in trouble: I was expelled for a brawl. On the whole I hadn't been so very wrong, but I shouldn't have fought. So I had to train as a welder through the labour exchange and work until I was called up. That too was good experience, and it came in handy more than once.

There are often times when you have to follow your heart, even if everyone around you disapproves. I suppose that is what is called intuition. That "sixth sense" would serve me many times once I went into business. Business, after all, is a game played for money, at high risk. But I still had some growing up to do before business. First, the army awaited me.

The Head Carries the Legs

To begin with, I arrived in the army still not really knowing Hebrew. I had never finished the *ulpan*, after all, and a welder doesn't need to do much talking. So in my unit I realised with horror that I didn't understand the orders. And how were my commanders to cope with a soldier like that?

The army's combat units were the first place in my life that could not throw me out: regulations didn't allow it. One of the officers told us recruits: "The only way out of here before your time is with your tag in your mouth." The tag, as everyone knows, is the plate bearing a soldier's service number. It is placed in a dead soldier's mouth when his body is carried off the battlefield. So my commanders could not get rid of me even if they had wanted to.

They had to teach me everything I was supposed to know. They could hardly kill me off!

I picked up Hebrew on the fly. Total immersion has rescued many worse cases than mine. When nobody around you utters a word in any other language, you learn whether you like it or not.

In short, the army made a completely different person of me, and that is no exaggeration. It was there that I heard a commander say something

like this: "Remember, you can do anything. All of a man's capabilities are in his head." Before long I put that idea to the test.

We had a ten-kilometre forced march ahead of us. We had already done five and seven, and coped splendidly. I wasn't worried in the least. Then, practically at the start, as we were picking up speed, I didn't look where I was going and plunged into a pit full of water. It was a rainy winter, and everything was sodden. I didn't hurt myself and even climbed out unaided, but I couldn't walk on. My legs wouldn't carry me. I didn't understand what had happened; fright, perhaps. My comrades had to drag me the whole way by the straps of my webbing, which was easier than unfolding a stretcher. I remember two sensations: unbearable shame inside, and the stars in the sky above my face… That was how my fellow soldiers and I learned at first hand one of the unbreakable laws of service in the Israeli army: as many as leave the base must come back.

A week later we had to set off on a new march, seventeen kilometres this time. I confess that after the previous one I was pretty scared, and I even wanted to stay behind at the base on some trumped-up excuse. But then my conscience won.

When the extra loads were handed out, the sergeant gave me (on top of my webbing, of course) a ten-litre jerrycan of water to carry. Anyone who has served in the Israeli army will know. "That's it," I thought. "Now my comrades will have to haul not only me but my ten kilos of load as well." And off we went, and I kept fearing that any moment it would become too much for me. On we went, and on, and I kept fearing it. I was so focused on waiting for trouble that I didn't even notice we had covered seventeen kilometres!

That was when I understood that it really is all in our heads.

Convince yourself your legs have given out, and you won't be able to walk, even though your legs are fine. Come up with some fear to drive you on, and that fear will carry you to your goal before you know it!

After trials like that, you begin to see life differently. You understand how you have to live in order to survive. After three years living in tents, in the desert, even serving as sergeant major of an entire training base,

wholly responsible for keeping it running, I found that much in civilian life came more easily to me than to others. I always remembered that things had been worse.

In the army I realised that learning is essential, and an enormous pleasure. I learned to answer for myself and for other people. I understood that shirking your duty is dishonourable. Before, I had known that in life you have to work, but I had known it somehow from the outside, from my family's example. Now it was my own experience: in the Israeli army, people work all the time.

That sense of responsibility, which took up permanent residence in me, I would carry into civilian life and into business. Along with the army's main lessons.

First: you never leave your own behind. As many as leave the base must come back. Second: it's all in your head, and then nothing is impossible.

CHAPTER TWO

My Work and My Luck

Now, dear reader, you will decide that I am boasting.

Telling you how clever, brave and responsible I am, and how I shielded my company with my own chest. But what I am going to relate in this chapter is not said to boast. I built a business of my own and ran it successfully, and I see no reason whatsoever to be shy about it. In truth, the good of the country ought to have made Israel's state bodies create effective companies like mine back when I was still knee-high to a grasshopper. Had the state been capable of it, there would have been no room for my private company in this field. But we existed, and we did well! And the talents of certain employees of state institutions, to my disappointment, lay in getting in the way of effective companies. But let me tell it in order.

"I Want to Be CEO!"

For some reason I always knew I would be a manager. I was inspired by the example of my grandfather, head of a housing construction combine in Kursk. I used to visit him at work and watch how gracefully he ran his people. It seemed to me that for him there was no such thing as an impossible situation. Watching my grandfather, I understood that being

the boss means responsibility, frayed nerves and grey hair. It is odd, really, that so many people who make it to the top think their position is simply a chance to order others about, deceive people and claim every victory for themselves. We will come back to managers like that.

I landed in my first recruitment company while I was still serving in the army. I was sergeant major of a training base. I had less than two months left to serve, and I could go out on leave every weekend. I went looking for a side job in my first trade, welding, and was suddenly asked: "Can you work for us? We need someone to drive people around."

Well, how about that! Straight into a recruitment company, and they'd give me a car too. What luck!

I asked the commander of the central base, to whom I reported: "Give me a chance. I'll carry out my duties in full, but I'll have to leave the base more often than just at weekends. The company isn't going to wait nearly two months for me to finish my service!" My wise commander agreed to meet me halfway, and I am very grateful to him for it. Otherwise I would never have got that job.

Soon I was spending every minute I could at the new company.

My colleagues realised that I valued my place and began giving me more and more to do, some of their own work included, I suspect. I spun like a fan. Up at five in the morning, rushing between factories, making it to the base for my duties, then flying back to work: bringing in lists of vacancies, agreeing terms.

Soon I was demobbed, in January, and I planned to go and study; the course was due to start in September. I filled that free stretch solidly with work, got to know everyone, and could list all my friends and competitors by heart. Before long my name was known in the recruitment business, both because of my boundless energy and because that market in Israel is a small world.

I went to study management and production, specialising in marketing, at a college for technicians in Acre. All the while I worked non-stop. That meant I didn't have to live off my parents and could provide myself with everything a young man of that age needs. I carried the stamina the army

had bred in me into civilian life, and grew permanently used to a punishing pace in which you get a great deal done and rest very little.

I enjoyed studying, unlike in the old days at school or the *ulpan*. I finally came to believe that learning is a useful and interesting process. Some lucky people grasp that while still at school; most only as adults. I am one of the majority.

Towards the end of college I had a crazy romance that turned into a whirlwind marriage. My beloved and I lived together for less than two months before we realised we had been rash. It was another step on the road to growing up. Breaking up with that girl, short as our love had been, knocked me off balance. Nobody in my family had ever divorced. Nobody condemned me, but I still felt out of sorts. It was hard to concentrate on my studies and sit my final exams. Right alongside the divorce, I was trying to sort out a job. I went to two interviews, but it was hard to get my head into serious work.

Youth and emotions got the better of me after all: I was suffering and couldn't decide what I wanted.

Then one of the companies where I had interviewed called me.

"You'd suit us as a branch manager."

"Wasn't I interviewing for the post of CEO?" I asked, if I'm honest, just to get rid of them.

"But the company already has a CEO. Me," came the stunned reply down the line.

"Then we've misunderstood each other," I said, and rang off, quite certain I was hearing from the man for the last time.

Naturally, I was surprised when he called again three days later. I suppose fate itself had decided we would be useful to each other. Ze'ev was the owner and CEO of a recruitment company. He told me my cheek had won him over and that he was prepared to try me out in any position I liked.

I must have struck him as a curious specimen who might just come to something. Today I feel the warmest gratitude towards Ze'ev. Without him I would never have gained the self-confidence that is so essential in

any business. Confidence, mind you, not the brashness I was still showing at the time. When I turned up for work, I protested that I was being given a car of the most basic class. The CEO said he would find me an "executive-level" car if I lived up to expectations.

Then we moved on to pay. I asked for the minimum wage plus one per cent of the extra turnover I brought in. Soon the army's training in finding my bearings came in handy: I put together a smart tender bid for a contract to clean recreation areas in the north of Israel. The project went well, and the company earned very decent money.

"Nobody who works for me has ever been paid this much," Ze'ev said, handing me my wages four months later. That one per cent of turnover had added up to a tidy sum.

Before long I had shown several more times that I was bringing the company real value. It was time to remind the boss that he had promised me an "executive car".

"What, am I supposed to give you mine? I don't have any other decent cars right now!" Ze'ev tried to fend me off.

"I don't know. But a man has to keep his word," I needled him.

A former special forces officer, and simply an honest man, my boss found the argument unanswerable. He really had given his word, and to him that was not an empty phrase. So I received from my manager not only an almost new jeep but also a lesson in standing by what you say. Ze'ev taught me a great deal. He valued me as an employee and wanted me to become a full partner in the company. But I was already eyeing new horizons.

Picture it: I'm twenty-three, I have a superb reputation with my respected (no joking!) boss, a genuinely cool jeep and bags of self-confidence. I felt rather like Benya Krik, my favourite hero from my beloved Babel: a tiger, a lion, a man who, given a handle on the sky, would pull it down to earth.

Putting On the Handcuffs

A cautious, sensible man would have stuck close to his older friend, become a partner, worked away quietly and at some point taken over the reins. Everyone gets old, after all, even the best senior partners in the world. But once again I wanted to ride my own destiny.

When my wise manager heard that I was leaving after all to start my own business, he said to me: "Remember, your own business is a pair of handcuffs. If it goes well, they're golden handcuffs. If it goes badly, they're just handcuffs."

I knew Ze'ev was right, but I had tasted money and the taste of making my own decisions. I genuinely felt capable of "pulling the sky down to earth". And I told my boss: I want everything to be my own, or nothing.

Ze'ev and I met and worked together again later on. At the dawn of my "solo career", when I was a brand-new businessman nobody had heard of, Ze'ev bailed me out by extending his insurance cover to me. And a little over a year later, it was he who came to me with an unexpected request. Ze'ev needed an operation and had nobody to leave the company with. By then I was his direct competitor, but I could not say no. I ran his firm for a month and a half (alongside my own business, of course), did not poach a single client and, needless to say, didn't steal a penny. My former boss paid me well for the work and was grateful for the help. Tell anyone, and they won't believe you!

Looking back with my present experience, I can see that I was naive. I ran my own business honestly and expected others to do the same. I was tremendously lucky with Ze'ev at the start of my career, and for some time afterwards I thought everyone did business the way my former boss did. Later, life would knock that out of me, but that came later.

I badly wanted to build a recruitment business of my own, and to build it especially well. That work seemed to me then, and still seems to me now, very important. Israel takes in thousands of new immigrants. I was one of them myself. I know that many are afraid of change, feel like strangers in their new country and suffer from the status they have lost. Time and again in the recruitment business I heard people say things like:

"Ah, back there I was head of a department in a big store, and what am I here?"

You can, of course, laugh at people like that or judge them, but in my view that is foolish. If a person has come to the country and wants to be a full member of society, they should be given that chance. People who look for opportunities for others often have to act as psychologists: to convince brand-new Israelis that the idea "here I'm nobody" gets them nowhere, that they must not give up, and that it is never too late to learn or retrain. Both people and the country gain from it.

With all these fine ideas in my head and a hundred shekels of share capital, in 1998 I opened my own firm.

While still working with Ze'ev, I had got to know a broker at a company called Perfect. At that Perfect I quite literally rented a corner, and put in a desk and a computer. A swivel office chair in almost decent condition was rescued from a rubbish tip. My dad repaired it and gave it new upholstery. That was the entire wealth of my first office. I named the firm Perfect Plus, after the company that had taken me in.

It would be unfair to say I was all on my own. I had a partner, a fellow student from the technicians' college named Robert. At first we had no car at all: I had given the "executive" jeep from my last job back to Ze'ev, since I no longer worked for him.

We had to take people to their workplaces on public transport. We chose a far from easy segment of the job market: blue-collar trades. Having worked as a welder, I could interview people looking for work as welders, fitters, turners and milling machine operators. Tradesmen came to us willingly, because not every recruitment agency in Israel knew how to work effectively with people like them.

About six months later, a chance came up to rent premises of our own instead of squatting at Perfect on sufferance. I faced a choice: a flat or an office. There wasn't enough money for both. Need I say that I rented the office, in Haifa? I lived in it for the next two years.

On the balcony there was a sofa bed, a wardrobe for my jacket and trousers, and an ironing board. I went to shower at the fitness centre next

door, which had a pool, on a membership. Young and single as I was, that way of life didn't bother me in the least; in its own way it was even rather great. I could console myself, half in jest, that many people dream of living like that: no commute, you just get out of bed and you're at work.

We found jobs for people who already had a trade, and found ways to put those who wanted to upgrade their skills through courses. It was then that we opened our first courses in Haifa: welding first, then CNC machine operators and setters.

In 2003 a big construction company failed to pay us for work we had done. On their side it was an out-and-out scam, but we were the ones who suffered. The hole in our finances was substantial, a huge amount of work went down the drain, and the company's position was shaken. My partner showed a trait that some would call prudence and others faint-heartedness. Even now I find it hard to judge his position. In a word, Robert wanted to start bankruptcy proceedings.

I disagreed with him and went my own way, declaring that I would fight to the end. We went to court over it.

I was left in the office with one solitary secretary. I kept running the business by phone and meeting our commitments on vacancies and training. I believed you must not let people down for so "trivial" a reason as a quarrel between partners and a hole in the finances.

My friend made a real mess of things. He lost every case and ended up owing me a fair amount of money by court order. And just then I took a step of colossal audacity. It was as if the 1998 model of me had come back: I believed in myself so completely that I went ahead without the slightest doubt that fate would see me through again. With the experience I have now, I can judge that my chances were one in a thousand. Or even less.

So here is what I did. I sold everything I could sell. I borrowed money from my parents. And with that last reserve I rented offices in Tel Aviv and Ashdod (which immediately raised our standing) and bought advertising for our courses all over the country. I raced between three cities like a racehorse. I managed to win clients, take their money in deferred payments and pay for the advertising. And I kept Perfect Plus

afloat! You can't help believing that God does not abandon people this brazen and this sure of themselves, as long as their aim is right. By then I already had a family, and my first daughter was born soon after, so I could not possibly be left without an income.

The law gave me seven years to recover Robert's debt through the courts. But I couldn't bring myself to do it. After we stopped working together, his life went all wrong: he had financial setbacks and other misfortunes. I decided I would not take the milk from his children's mouths.

At that moment I was the stronger one, and it seemed to me that strength should go with kindness, not vengefulness.

I was young and naive, as I said. But I think a little of that naivety should be kept somewhere deep in the soul. Otherwise a person responsible for any undertaking slides into cynicism. And that harms the undertaking, the person and the country.

I will come back to that thought.

Enter Status

Now to the most fruitful period of my life.

I put money, heart and soul, and all my energy into the company. I was convinced that I was doing wonderful work and doing it well, that I had like-minded people beside me, and that together we could move mountains.

The company's affairs went really well. This is where my words sound most like boasting, but I cannot help saying that we became one of the leading companies in our field in Israel.

We saw the need to train people, and our first welding courses were up and running even before the bankruptcy that never happened in 2003. After that, courses for welders and low-voltage systems technicians, programmers and logistics specialists, quality controllers and HR managers appeared within our company. We founded a vocational training centre, Status School. The Perfect Plus employment agency carried on

working actively. Together we were now called Status Group, a network of retraining and employment centres. We ran eight branches on a permanent basis, from Karmiel to Be'er Sheva.

Yes, it sounds like an advertisement.

But I want to say that Status Group was the fruit of incredible, selfless labour, mine and my staff's. For the sake of the work, the people of Status forgot about sleep, food and family. The company found jobs for thousands of people and helped them find their way in life. They chose a profession on our recommendation, studied it, and then the overwhelming majority found good positions, again with our help. Companies in the retraining business rarely manage that.

Ninety per cent of our work was with Russian-speaking immigrants. We often ran into, and battled, the notorious mood of "here I'm nobody, I'll never get anywhere". We sometimes turned former Russian writers, teachers and ballet dancers into excellent programmers. We didn't just show people the way; we led them by the hand along it, all the way to success.

What is valuable is that most of Status Group's new clients were people brought to us by our former "pupils", the people we had trained and placed. Their friends, their acquaintances, even their children! In the fifteen years the company existed, some people's children grew up and needed vocational training and a job in their turn. In other words, our excellent professional reputation was confirmed by the most unshakeable argument there is: the word of the people.

That is worth a great deal.

One more thing. When we were preparing to fight for our business, once that became necessary, we did the sums: in fifteen years we had brought the State of Israel several hundred million shekels. Every person who, with our help, became not an immigrant on benefits but a worthy, tax-paying citizen saved the state about eight thousand shekels a month. Add up everyone we trained and found work for, and you get an enormous sum.

So when I say that Status Group was one of the best companies in vocational training and employment in Israel, I am not stretching the truth one bit. The most surprising thing, I repeat, is that the state ought to have set up government projects of its own with the same functions as ours. Then private operators like us would have had no room to spread our wings.

In time it would become clear to us that in Israel's state bodies there are officials for whom the words "the interests of the people and the state" are an empty sound. These remarkable people have quite different interests.

Fate saw fit to put an end to my naivety and my high-mindedness. I faced a situation in which I had to go against my conscience and my honour, and against the law into the bargain. Or else sacrifice my life's work, if you will forgive the pathos. I refused to take part in the criminal schemes that certain structures tried to impose on me. More precisely, certain individuals, to whom their own interests mattered more than the country's.

They turned out to be more powerful than the honest people. Status fell victim to that absurd state of affairs.

CHAPTER THREE

A Voucher for Reprisals

And now, dear reader, I come to events that are hard to believe. You will keep exclaiming: "That can't be!" When this truly fateful story for my business was just beginning, I too told myself: that can't be. It can't be that people entrusted with responsibility for the country and its people would forget that responsibility. It can't be that those whose job is to organise our lives properly would instead devise illegal schemes for their own benefit. Not, at any rate, in the democratic State of Israel, where there is so much talk about the law.

You will say I am naive. I won't even argue. I know there are crooks in the state machinery of every country.

There are no perfect states, and no civil servants sitting on clouds.

And yet I kept exclaiming: that can't be!

Because I had learned and understood how powerful these people are here, and how unassailable their position is!

Is there anyone in the State of Israel who can bring such people to heel?

Or does lawlessness reign here?

It was to answer that question that I conceived this book.

Friendly Networks

Many people know that almost any new immigrant who wants to find a good job in Israel would rather upgrade their qualifications or change profession altogether, because their education does not always match our country's labour market. One way to pay for new training is a voucher from the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption. It is a certificate worth a set sum of money, and not such a small one: up to ten thousand shekels.

Which company, college or school a person takes that money to is their own choice.

In the previous chapter I told you that my brainchild, the Status Group network of employment and retraining centres, was very successful at preparing people for a new life. I won't boast again. What matters for the rest of the story is that we placed a great many people in good jobs. Whether we trained a candidate ourselves or the person came to us with a profession already in hand, most of them found excellent work. We were known all over the country.

Some readers may know of a state employment project called *Ahven*, Hebrew for "guidance". The idea was that the state commissioned a group of private companies that had won a government tender to train people and find them jobs.

The companies in this project dealt in career guidance. Retraining for blue-collar trades, for example, or any serious requalification, was not part of the plan. They offered Hebrew courses, management courses and "computers for beginners". The project's psychologists gave people extensive advice on vocational aptitude: whether someone could work as a programmer, say, whether it suited them, what profession would suit them better. In other words, they pointed a person in the right direction, as the name says. How well they guided people determined the percentage who were successfully placed in jobs. That percentage mattered a great deal to *Ahven*, and you will see why in a moment.

One fine day in 2007, the phone rang at the Status branch in Ashdod. My deputy heard something like this at the other end:

"Hello. My name is Ayelet, I head the *Ahven* project's branch in Ashdod. I've heard a lot about the wonderful work Status Group does. From what I'm told, you've placed an amazing number of people in good jobs. I have a request. Could you, as a friendly gesture, give the *Ahven* project the details of the immigrants you've placed? Just a few dozen?"

"But why?!"

"Well, you see, you've already placed them anyway. Your Status has already been paid fees for them by their employers. And we're part of a state project, and the Absorption Ministry pays us a bonus for every person placed…"

What else could that mean? To call things by their proper names, we were being invited to hand *Ahven*, illegally, the personal data of people we were responsible for, so that public money could be pocketed. That is how we understood it.

I should note that Status was licensed by the Ministry of Labour both as a recruitment agency and as a training centre.

We worked closely with state bodies. All kinds of people studied with us, immigrants and others. Immigrants often studied on vouchers, and in many cases getting a voucher depended on the *Ahven* project: anyone wishing to study at our college obtained confirmation from a project psychologist that the profession they had chosen with us was right for them.

It is hard to imagine the astonishment and indignation of my deputy, and then of me.

In plain words, it came to this: give us your clients' personal data, and we'll pass them off as ours. And we'll get paid for what we didn't do.

So we were being invited to help misappropriate public money. In other words, to take part in a crime.

And by the way, for this suspicious plan to work, Status would have had to commit the "childish prank" of unauthorised disclosure of citizens' personal data to third parties. Personal data, as everyone knows, are confidential, and disclosing them is an offence. The Ministry of Labour could have stripped us of our state licence.

My frightened deputy started ringing me. What does this mean, and what do we do? she asked. That was when I said for the first time: that can't be! Sadly, I would have to repeat that hackneyed phrase many more times. And ask myself how such a thing could happen in a civilised country where the law is the same for everyone, or at least that is what is loudly proclaimed.

"We will have nothing to do with suspicious schemes," I told my deputy. "I get the feeling the plan is designed to steal public money. They seem to want to drag us into a crime. If they call again, tell them it's unacceptable to us."

I suppose that at that moment I looked a bit like some fearless superhero, Zorro or Captain America. But I had no wish to show off, or to reform a lady called Ayelet by my own example. I simply understood that if I let my company be drawn into a dirty scheme, I would be badly exposed. My business would have a criminal history.

There was one more phone call between my deputy and Ayelet.

"My boss thinks our company shouldn't take part in your venture," my colleague said.

"Maybe your boss just doesn't know how things work? Everybody does it," replied the *Ahven* representative.

"My manager instructed me to tell you that we will not do what everybody does!"

"Well then. As you wish. It's your decision," the woman replied meaningfully.

Many will agree that from the mouth of a state project's representative, words like that seldom bode well.

We would soon realise that real trouble was beginning.

Banana Republics Have Nothing on Us!

That can't be, I told myself for the second time. To be honest, the situation was so absurd that I wasn't even frightened. The *Ahven* representative had simply forgotten that there are certain limits, I assured myself and my

colleagues. For some reason she thinks it's very easy to draw honest businessmen into dubious schemes. Just hint at the all-powerful state bodies and, if need be, scare them a little. I suppose with some companies' representatives that tactic works. Perhaps someone did lose their nerve.

But we won't lose ours, I reasoned. That is not what the Israeli army taught me, nor what I taught myself as I climbed the first rungs in business. What is this, some banana republic? We live under the rule of law. There are bodies whose direct job is to bring officials like that to book. Status is a conscientious company. We hold a state licence as an official recruitment agency and training centre. We have been in the market since the last century, since 1998.

Our reputation was earned by honest work, without deceit. What, or who, could seriously threaten us?

Naivety: that is what I now call my position back then.

Life very quickly explained to me that the country I had come to as a teenager, where I grew up and came of age, the country I had come to love, could in some respects give any banana republic a hundred points' head start. Sad, but true.

Soon we began to notice that Status really was running into new and strange problems.

For example, a month after that memorable conversation with Ayelet, the traditional employment services fair that the Absorption Ministry holds from time to time was due to take place. We had always taken part, and now we were turned down. The organising committee said recruitment companies were no longer being invited, only direct employers. Strange, I thought: how can you exclude from an employment fair the very people who find people jobs? So we applied as a training organisation, and even as a direct employer: we ourselves needed staff, coordinators, teachers, engineers. The committee replied that there were too many participants altogether and no places left. A couple of my staff and I went along simply as visitors; nobody is forbidden to come and look. Imagine our surprise when we saw that the vast majority of exhibitors were recruitment companies. And there was plenty of room. Everyone

who wanted to had signed up and was advertising for all they were worth, while we, it turned out, had been deliberately cut out! I would stress that this was a heavy blow to Status's profitability and prestige: taking part in that fair is, you might say, obligatory for any serious company. Not to mention that every visitor to the fair was a potential client of ours.

From that moment on we found ourselves facing unfair competition. And the spokes being thrust into the wheels of our business were only beginning.

An immigrant, after all, goes to the Absorption Ministry to get a training voucher. He decides for himself, as I said, which organisation he will take that money to. But those who have only just arrived and haven't yet found their bearings in the new reality can get advice.

At that time, the *Ahven* project I mentioned was in full bloom. It was to *Ahven* staff that people who had recently arrived in the country turned when deciding where to study and find work. The project is a state one, immigrants trust it, and they often do exactly what the project coordinator advises. And then we were told that *Ahven* staff, answering newcomers' questions, frequently spoke ill of our Status and advised immigrants to go to any other company to study or find work, anyone but us.

You must understand that this is against the law. The psychologists of a state project have no right whatsoever to recommend, or advise against, specific companies. They may only advise a person whether a given profession suits them. Yet *Ahven*'s coordinators tried to talk people out of working with Status, even those who had already come to us and whom we ourselves had sent to their career-guidance psychologist.

A real campaign of sabotage was being waged against us!

We realised that a state body was deliberately fighting one particular private company. And this was clearly connected with my refusal to take part in the suspicious scheme the *Ahven* representative had proposed!

At the time I still hadn't grasped how far the rot had gone. We'll find someone to rein them in, I thought. Is it a ministry project? It is. Who at the Absorption Ministry deals with employment? The Employment Department. It is headed by Claudia Katz. Her direct duty is to find out

why staff on a project dreamed up by her own department are blackening the good name of one of the best recruitment and training companies in the country.

A meeting was held at my office about cooperation between Status, the Absorption Ministry and the Jewish Agency. I will tell you about that project later. Among those present was the head of the Absorption Ministry's Employment Department, Claudia Katz. When the main business had been discussed, I asked Mrs Katz to hear me out in private and told her my troubles. I complained that Status had been barred from an important employment services fair, and plainly by deception. I told her that *Ahven* staff, in breach of the law, were campaigning against Status among immigrants. I reported that *Ahven* had opened programming courses of its own, although these were not allowed under the project, and was sending people to study with itself, which broke the project's rules.

"Yes, that's not right," said Mrs Katz. "Put all of this in an official letter to my department, and I'll look into it."

We wrote it all up with every detail, names and document references, and sent it to the Employment Department.

We did not yet understand that we were about to complain to the right hand about the left.

For more than six months they plainly strung us along. The department answered our phone calls with cheerful reports that our problem was being monitored, but there was so very much to do. Be patient, they said, we'll sort it out.

Meanwhile the problems spread to Status branches all over the country. At the Absorption Ministry itself, officials were now telling immigrants directly that they "wouldn't advise" dealing with our company.

It wasn't that our business fell apart and nobody came to us any more. Word of mouth, which builds a company's reputation better than any official advertising, still brought us a steady number of students.

But Status still found itself facing unfair competition, deliberately created by officials of the Employment Department. In effect, we were being slandered: people who knew nothing whatsoever about how things

worked in their new homeland were given to understand that they had better not deal with us.

Put yourself in the shoes of an immigrant who has just arrived: nothing makes sense, who's who is a mystery, whom to trust, God only knows! Many will simply remember how they themselves felt right after arriving: rather like newborn kittens. And facing such an immigrant sits a solid, impressive representative of the state (from a ministry project or the ministry itself), saying something like this: "Don't worry, the state won't abandon you. You can get some training, there's the voucher system, there are our courses, Hebrew, for example, or computers for beginners. You'd like other courses? Well, I don't know. You're entitled to take your voucher elsewhere, not just to our courses. There's just one place I wouldn't advise you to go. It's up to you, but I've warned you."

What does the immigrant do? Exactly what the state project's representative advised. Later he realises that his voucher money has been spent on nonsense, he still has no decent profession, and he has no idea where to look for work. From friends or an online forum he learns that there are training and recruitment companies, learns about Status and others. Only now, to study a proper profession and find a job, he will have to pay out of his own pocket. The voucher's already gone.

Those are the people we were losing thanks to the ministry's outright campaign of subversion against us!

Some six months later, Claudia Katz sent me an official reply stating that the facts I had cited had been investigated and no violations found. That gave me grounds to suspect that I really was complaining to the right hand about the left, and that one hand washes the other. The Employment Department surely knew that *Ahven* staff were making people dubious offers and giving them questionable advice, and nobody had any interest in the truth coming out. Laws were being broken, the ministry's own regulations were being broken. The Employment Department looked less like a state body subject to the law than like a private shop where the owner decides everything.

I sent my next official request to the deputy director general of the Absorption Ministry. He summoned Mrs Katz and me. I spoke quite bluntly: I said my company was being prevented from working, the head of the Employment Department was pretending I had made it all up, and the whole story had started with a conversation with an *Ahven* representative in 2007.

Shortly after the meeting with the deputy director general, something very telling happened. The Absorption Ministry's office in Ashdod invited the participants in that memorable conversation to a meeting: Ayelet, representing *Ahven*, and my deputy. We were encouraged: it looked like a face-to-face confrontation, and now a ministry official would finally get to the bottom of what was going on. Under the Absorption Ministry's regulations, that incident called for a proper inquiry by a full committee.

But once again we were to be astonished and exclaim: that can't be! Instead of an investigation, the ministry's representative suggested to my deputy that she forget the whole thing and settle the matter amicably. In other words, quietly hush up an awkward story in which the Absorption Ministry was involved!

As if we were not dealing with a government department but haggling in a bazaar!

We could not agree to that, however much we longed for peace and quiet. Such a settlement would have meant we had to go on playing by the rules of the bazaar. We would in effect be granting the ministry the right to play dirty and crush anyone who disagreed. And I believed a fair investigation was essential, so as not to turn a state under the rule of law into a bazaar.

On the subject of fair play and foul, I can offer a fact that speaks volumes. A few years later I read in the press that Claudia Katz was honouring Ayelet as *Ahven*'s best employee of the year in the field of employment, that is, as the staff member who had helped place the largest number of immigrants in the whole project. You have already read about Ayelet's methods of achieving such results. What it cost the state is for the State Comptroller and the police to find out.

In 2008 elections were held, and the Minister of Absorption changed. The new minister was Eli Aflalo. He turned out to be a true professional and a decent man. He found the time to look into our case personally. Naturally, I sent a letter to his office asking for help. Without much hope, even: simply because if there is a chance to do something in your own defence, you had better take it. To my considerable surprise, a week later the minister himself came to our college to check how our teaching was organised. He said he could see no violations at all and didn't understand what complaints there could be against us.

After Aflalo's visit the pressure on us stopped. For six months we worked normally. I am grateful to that man for the respite. I suppose he was able to bring employees like Claudia Katz to order.

In 2009 there were elections again, and Sofa Landver became Minister of Absorption. I neither wish nor am able to claim that my business's new problems were connected with her person, but with her appointment as minister those problems returned and even grew considerably. Coincidence? Or am I being naive again?

By then I already knew I was not the only one.

Illegal and semi-legal schemes are par for the course in some of Israel's state bodies. Honest businessmen are drawn into them. Many entrepreneurs reason like this: what can I do? They're the state; you can't fight city hall; better go along with it. I suppose there aren't many as stubborn as me. I know of cases where businessmen who took part in dubious ventures like the one *Ahven* proposed to my company were later set up and found themselves facing criminal charges.

No surprise there. In case you didn't know, a state official in Israel is something of a deity. He is untouchable. A person joins a state body, serves there for not so very many years, four or five, and then acquires a status rather like a member of parliament's immunity. In Hebrew it is called *kviut*, "permanence". He cannot be dismissed. His department covers for him. You can't even sue an individual official, only the ministry. And a system like that means you will never find anyone to

blame. It brings to mind another of Arkady Raikin's famous sketches, in which nobody can be found responsible for a badly made suit. And nobody can be punished for the suit coming out crooked.

But back then, in 2009, I still thought it was not the system that was rotten, but that certain individuals within it had forgotten their duty.

Sofa Landver had become the new minister, so I should turn to her as well. I even spoke with her in person several times and showed her documents proving the Employment Department's improper conduct. I had evidence in hand that the department allowed itself to draw up state tenders unethically, to influence their outcome, and to forge documents and minutes of meetings. Mrs Landver heard me out and replied: "Yes, this needs to be properly looked into. I'll look into it," she said. And every time after I appealed to her, I learned of fresh trouble that dishonest officials were making for my company.

I felt they had me backed against the wall. At times it seemed there was no longer any point in fighting.

Still, I tried every option that came my way.

I will mention more than once how I appealed, in person and in writing, to various authorities. At one stage I asked members of the Knesset for help. There were also cases like this: senior figures in political circles and people of some standing at city halls approached me. They promised to help me in my plight, citing their political influence. In the end they used my situation for their own ends and never gave the help they had promised.

As it happened, I found myself at a holiday reception held by the Yisrael Beiteinu party, and Sofa Landver was there too. I said to her privately something like this: "For several years my business has had problems, and for several years I have been asking for them to be looked into. I'm not asking for special treatment or any kind of favour; I just want to work on equal terms with other companies. We are being fought by illegal methods, and I believe those doing the fighting should be exposed. As minister, you should have got my situation unstuck. Otherwise, either you are not capable of running the ministry, or you are in on it with those using illegal methods against an honest business."

That was too much, I admit. I, a mere mortal, had allowed myself to speak frankly and sharply to a goddess from the ministry.

With those words I probably brought down on myself several more very painful blows from the state machine. But by then I had lost all faith in a fair hearing. With that bluntness I wanted to shake the situation loose somehow. I will tell you shortly what came of it.

Nonetheless, I also tried appealing to the State Comptroller, and even to the police. For several years the Comptroller's office gave me the same answer: a great deal of work, they haven't got round to your request yet. The police case didn't move either, and I couldn't understand why.

I felt as if I were throwing my whole body against a brick wall.

As if I really were living in a banana republic, one where even the bananas are kept under lock and key and only state officials are allowed to trade in them.

Who Benefits?

The celebrated Roman judge Lucius Cassius Longinus Ravilla formulated the central question of any legal inquiry more than two thousand years ago: *Cui prodest?* Who benefits? It is a very wise question, and not only for the courtroom. In any tangled affair, a sensible person will immediately ask himself: who benefits from this?

I asked myself that question too. And the answer I arrived at was not a comforting one.

Clearly, illegal methods benefit those to whom they bring income. Nobody will break the law and take risks if it doesn't pay.

In our case, the dubious schemes, the ones I came to know about, brought income to those who devised them and to those who covered for them. The trouble fell on those who refused to take part. Officials placed in their posts to protect the interests of the people were protecting interests that were not entirely clear. One suspects they were simply their own. I have yet to find any other explanation.

We became more and more convinced that in Israel, it turns out, the law does not apply to everyone or in every case. And people and companies honestly working for the good of the country are entirely dependent on influential officials. The situation looked like this: if you do as the ministry says, your business goes fine. Even then, only up to a point: I have already mentioned hearing of some participants in dubious schemes who ended up in court. But if you defy the ministry, the pressure on your business will be very real. Creating unbearable conditions for you will be not only the officials themselves but also people eager to curry favour with them.

My belief that truth and justice could be won kept me fighting for several more years. Going to work, getting things done, demanding a fair hearing at every turn. Living and surviving amid the unfair competition that the Employment Department so skilfully engineered.

A little earlier I called my conviction that justice exists and the law works "naivety".

You could call it that, but an honest person would more likely call it conscience.

Even now I think there is still a point in fighting. My youth hardened me; I am not used to giving up, and I still don't.

I think that Sofa Landver and Claudia Katz, intelligent and experienced functionaries that they are, see the lawlessness at the ministry perfectly clearly. They ought to stop it, but they don't! Instead they fight those who want to work honestly. Perhaps here too it is worth asking: who benefits?

I can speak frankly and in detail only about how they fought me and my company. Looking for other examples is not my job but that of the police, the State Comptroller and the courts.

So as not to make unfounded claims, in the following chapters I will tell you a few stories about how my business was dealt with. True stories with a criminal undertone, with real people in them. There were so many such stories, in fact, that they would fill a multi-volume edition the size of Lenin's collected works.

But I did not conceive this book in order to tire you with tedious, endless details of my struggle. I want Israel's official bodies, whose direct duty is to restore justice and the rule of law where they have been violated, to turn their attention to this situation at last. Because in our democratic and civilised state, utter lawlessness is going on!

Either the police, the State Attorney's Office and the State Comptroller must look into this problem and give it a legal assessment, or let the law enforcement agencies say it straight out: these are now the rules by which our state bodies work, these are the norms in our state and our society. Then people who want to work honestly will be warned that they must play by these new rules. And they won't fall into the trap, as I did. Because if a state body is run like a private shop, there is no point in exclaiming "that can't be!" In such circumstances anything can be, and there is nothing to be surprised at.

One should not be surprised but resigned.

Or should one?

CHAPTER FOUR

A Drama in Five Scenes

It is hard to believe that lawlessness and outrage are rife in our civilised state unless the claim is borne out by real stories.

So far in my account I have not confined myself to general reflections; I have offered facts throughout. Now I would like to introduce you, dear readers, to several specific cases of lawlessness directed at my company.

Turn the page and you will find five telling stories. They are vivid illustrations of how certain high-ranking state figures have bent the laws of the State of Israel to their own interests.

All these stories feature real people, with names and positions. The most interesting thing is that most of them still hold senior posts: the very same posts they held while the war on my company was being waged.

These people are clinging tight to their very lucrative jobs!

As in the rest of the book, there is not a drop of fiction in these stories.

I have said already that these episodes are only a small part of the lawlessness I had to face. These stories describe most precisely, like a play in several scenes, how dishonest officials killed my business stage by stage for their own ends.

I invite you, dear readers, to measure these people's actions against the laws by which human beings ought to live. Comparing these stories with administrative and criminal law is not my business but that of the police

and the prosecutors. It seems fitting to me to recall here laws that appeared in deep antiquity and are set down in Holy Scripture.

Religiosity has nothing to do with it. The Commandments are a body of wise ancient rules that helped our forefathers live justly. Nobody will argue that they have lost their relevance.

Read, and compare.

Scene One: Money or Reputation?

But the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself.
Leviticus 19:34

Jews, as we all know, tend to worry even where there is nothing to worry about. And moving permanently to another country is always a major stress for anyone, even a member of the most imperturbable nation.

That is why the Jewish Agency is so useful to Jews who have decided to be reunited with their people, as Theodor Herzl intended. The Agency's task is to convince people that there is nothing to fear in coming, that new immigrants will be welcomed and looked after, that the ancient law of hospitality is still alive in the Holy Land. The moment an immigrant crosses the border of the State of Israel, he comes into the care of the Ministry of Absorption. The Agency may go on working with him, but it has to coordinate its efforts with the ministry.

Our new acquaintance, Meir Lopatinsky, coordinated several projects at the Agency, among them *Aliyah 2000*. He was a good man who worked out of conscience, not out of fear. He genuinely cared about the fate of people who had decided to return to their historic homeland in Israel.

The idea of *Aliyah 2000* was to invite immigrants not into a void, but with the prospect of acquiring a profession and finding work very quickly. To that end the Agency, as usual, coordinated with the Absorption Ministry, and then invited our Status to take part.

We were to travel around the cities of Russia and Ukraine, talk to people who wanted to move to Israel, and select from among them people

to train in our professions. As recruitment professionals, we were to interest people by showing them clear prospects for putting their abilities to use in their new homeland.

Their families would come with them, and they too would have some idea of the future from the start. In theory, these new immigrants would quickly become worthy citizens of Israel: working in skilled jobs, paying taxes and needing no benefits. Unlike a fairly large number of newcomers who are forced (and sometimes prefer) to idle away months while they leisurely look for work that suits their tastes and their wallets.

To be honest, I was really inspired. For us it was a project best summed up by that modern word, "cool". Status would take part as an equal partner in a project run by the Agency and the Absorption Ministry. For our prestige, reputation and profitability, that would be a big plus.

And the idea itself was very useful and, if you like, humane. We were to bring enormous benefit to Israel and to Israelis. It all looked wonderful. I give you my word that how much I would earn from it was by no means my first thought. By then Status was already successful and widely known. We were doing necessary, sought-after work training and placing people, mostly from the former CIS countries. We were very keen to take part in a project that promised not so much big profits as social benefit and a boost to our reputation.

The people responsible gathered in my office to discuss *Aliyah 2000* in detail. Among those representing the Absorption Ministry was the head of the Employment Department, Claudia Katz. It was at that meeting that I first told her my business was having problems somehow connected with the *Ahven* project. But that was not the main purpose of the meeting, of course: we were there to take the key decisions on *Aliyah 2000*.

The Agency's representative, Meir Lopatinsky, announced that to begin with the plan was to bring over fifty families to be trained at Status colleges and placed in jobs by Status. From the Absorption Ministry's representatives we learned that the main source of funding for *Aliyah 2000* would be the ministry's famous vouchers. We, for our part, undertook to prepare the ground for the start of the project. By then my staff had already

visited a number of Russian and Ukrainian cities with Agency representatives and found potential participants for our splendid venture there. Our branches set up headquarters that advised anyone interested over Skype. I paid for all of it myself, without yet asking the ministry for any money.

"And why is Status Group the only training and recruitment organisation being considered for *Aliyah 2000*?" Mrs Katz suddenly asked.

"According to our information, many immigrants have trained with Status and found jobs very successfully," said Meir. "We think working with this company will be reliable and successful."

The meeting ended in what seemed to be general agreement, but it soon became clear that our participation did not suit everyone. The head of the Employment Department sent us an official letter stating that the decision on who would take part in the project had to be made collectively. There are many colleges and recruitment agencies in the country, and whether Status or another company took part should be decided by an authoritative committee.

In due course the committee met. It was made up of worthy people, none of whom were, or are, open to question. The Manufacturers' Association was represented by Mrs Tali Lutani; the Ministry of Labour by Mr Moti Markovich, the ministry's chief specialist in training CNC machine programmers and setters; Meir Lopatinsky sat on the committee for the Agency, and Mrs Claudia Katz for the Absorption Ministry. And there were my deputy and I.

Of course, not everyone agreed outright that Status Group was the best recruitment company to take part in *Aliyah 2000*. That is what the committee met for: to discuss differing views. Mr Markovich voiced a concern that we did not train CNC specialists well enough. "Your courses are rather short on hours," he said. "On the Ministry of Labour courses we train the same setters for almost three times as long."

To which I replied that our placement rate was high, which meant we were providing training of a quality that suited modern production.

Next on the committee's agenda was a visit to a plant that employs CNC operators and setters on a large scale. The whole committee went to the Hamlet metalworking plant to hear from the professionals whether they needed more staff and whether Status trained that staff well. I should say that a great many of our graduates were working at Hamlet. The production director said the plant had worked with Status for a long time and fruitfully, and had no complaints about the quality of its courses.

"And are the equivalent courses run by the Ministry of Labour any worse?" the director was asked.

"If the Ministry of Labour could provide the number and quality of workers that Status provides, would we be paying Status for its graduates?"

It was a weighty argument.

The Hamlet production director was then given a brief outline of *Aliyah 2000* and asked whether he would take on new immigrants under such a project.

"If Status trains them, yes," said the plant boss. "I could do with about forty people…"

The committee had nothing more to object. Our company was approved as a participant in the project. The agreement was signed, which in principle automatically meant that the Absorption Ministry's money had been allocated. That is standard practice: a state project is not signed unless the money for it has been set aside.

For several months we travelled to Russia and Ukraine and "won over" twenty-nine families for the project. These people were sitting on their packed suitcases.

And then a call came from the Employment Department. Mrs Claudia Katz informed us that the Absorption Ministry had suddenly run out of money. And so she, Mrs Katz, with sadness and regret, was suspending the entire voucher scheme, which meant that the enrolment of new participants in *Aliyah 2000* was automatically suspended too. A great pity. I enquired whether we would receive an official letter about this. "No, why?" came the reply. "It's enough that I'm telling you."

As a result, the joint ministry and Agency project became a dead loss. Any project only starts paying its way from a certain participant onwards, and certainly not from the first. In our case, roughly from the fortieth. And so far we had recruited only twenty-nine. It turned out that Status really was taking part purely for the prestige.

Not only would we earn nothing, we would be seriously out of pocket.

I began to suspect that the head of the department had exceeded her authority. Because, I repeat, a state project does not begin unless the funds for it are provided in full. The money for vouchers could not, in theory, just "suddenly run out" for one particular project. As in the old Jewish joke: "Everywhere else it was the Sabbath, but around me it was Thursday!"

So, I thought, does Mrs Katz want to tear up the agreement for some purposes of her own? That would be an unlawful use of a department head's powers.

And, I remind you, she refused us even an official written notice. Could no clerk be found in the whole department to draft a piece of paper? Or was it deliberate, to make it easier to cover their tracks?

But our work was under way! Nearly thirty families had signed up to *Aliyah 2000*, and some had already arrived in the country by then! These people were expecting us to settle them in a hostel, start their training quickly and find them good jobs. And nobody had cancelled our obligations to them. Claudia Katz's words meant only that there would be no new participants, so not only would we make no profit, we would lose a tidy sum for good. The head of the Employment Department, it seems, knew very well at what stage to tip the whole project into the red.

I rang Mrs Katz.

"How can this be? The ministry was supposed to allocate the money first and only then start the project!"

"The ministry doesn't owe anybody anything," came the astonishing reply.

"But you understand that a project only becomes viable from a certain number of participants!" I exclaimed. "If we carry on with the number

you're leaving us, the company will go into the red and suffer serious losses!"

"Then don't carry on," Mrs Katz advised. "Pull out right now. Why lose so much money? We'll find someone who can manage the job."

So that was it! Had this whole business of the ministry's money "suddenly running out" been cooked up to cut Status out of the project?

These events coincided roughly with my appeal to Claudia Katz's office about our troubles with *Ahven*. Our work was in difficulties as it was, and now there was the unpleasant prospect of letting down twenty-nine immigrants and their families, after we had promised them the earth in the name of the Agency, the Absorption Ministry and ourselves! For if Status had "jumped ship", who would have given these people retraining and jobs?

My company and I had landed in what chess players call *zugzwang*: a position in which any move a player makes will only do harm. The player must choose between a greater and a lesser harm, because in chess you cannot pass. And I could not pass either.

Claudia Katz had put me in a position where I would lose either money or my good name.

Abandoning the project would have meant reputational death for Status. The Agency respected us; employers all over the country knew us. Had we followed Claudia Katz's advice, nobody would ever have dealt with us again. In Israel everyone knows everyone.

Status might well have been saddled with most of the blame for wrecking the project. We didn't even have written confirmation that the voucher money was no longer coming our way. Mrs Katz, after all, had declined to send us a letter. She would display her remarkable qualities more than once again, qualities that make one suspect that these intrigues served her own interests.

Plainly, the nearly thirty families in Russia and Ukraine who had believed in *Aliyah 2000*, who had trusted the word of the Agency, the Absorption Ministry and Status, did not concern Claudia Katz in the least. To her they were small change, while she pursued her own ends. What

ends? That, in my firm belief, is a question she should answer to the police and the State Comptroller.

As for continuing *Aliyah 2000* without Status, I see only two possibilities. First: those twenty-nine immigrant families would have arrived to nothing; they would simply have been deceived, and they would never have got the truth out of the Absorption Ministry. Second: in place of Status, which Mrs Katz disliked, another, more pliable company would have been invited, vouchers would have been found for it as if by magic, and the project would have carried on. So my professional judgement and common sense tell me. Miracles don't happen, and nobody works for free, let alone at a loss.

I decided to see things through with the twenty-nine families who had already been promised our help. My accountants later worked out that I lost about 250,000 shekels on *Aliyah 2000*. But we brought the families over, housed them in a hostel, took those twenty-nine people on for training, gave them a profession and then a job.

In our *zugzwang* we chose the lesser evil: losing money for good was not as frightening as ruining our reputation.

And so, at our own expense, we "hauled" nearly thirty people into a new life. Not long after arriving in Israel, these people became full citizens. They worked in the trades they had learned with us and paid taxes instead of living on benefits. I have mentioned that the difference to the state between a thriving taxpayer and a benefit recipient is about 8,000 shekels a month. In the state's favour, of course. And we provided the country with those twenty-nine full citizens at our own expense, taking heavy losses and asking the ministry for no support.

Support? Some hope!

If I were to list every spoke the Employment Department thrust into our wheels while we were doing this work, the chapter would swell to the size of an adventure novel. I will tell you about just one, the closing chord: how Claudia Katz personally tried to blacken Status's name when the work was already done.

Once the part of *Aliyah 2000* that Mrs Katz had left us was completed, a final meeting of all the parties was held. We presented a detailed report on our work, showing that everyone who had come over had been trained and placed in jobs. We presented lists, company names, telephone numbers.

Then the esteemed head of the Employment Department takes the floor. She accuses us of falsifying the report. The department, says Claudia Katz, has checked the details of these people. Not all of them, she says, are working where Mr Feldman claims.

I invited the official to point out on the list which people she thought we were lying about. Mrs Katz ticked three names. I said: "Now, before this distinguished gathering, we will check which of us is not telling the truth." I switched my phone to speaker and started calling. My office gave me the numbers of the companies where I expected to find the people we had placed. At each company I asked whether such-and-such an employee was at work and could be brought to the phone. When the person came on, I asked: "Are you so-and-so? How long have you been working there? Have you left at any point? Are you happy with your working conditions?" In short, I proved by experiment, before that high assembly, that every one of the people Claudia Katz had written off as "dead souls" turned out to be very much alive and working where we had placed them.

And what do you think happens next?

Next, the minutes of the final meeting are circulated. This is normal ministry practice: the minutes go to the minister, the director general and all the other participants in the meeting, the Agency and ourselves.

In the minutes, Claudia Katz writes… that Status falsified its report and that there are falsifications in the lists of people placed in jobs!

This after I had phoned the companies at the meeting, in front of living witnesses, and proved that Katz's accusations were groundless!

Within literally a day of everyone concerned receiving the minutes, I sent out a rebuttal. It too went to every party concerned, including the minister and the ministry's director general. I worded it in the harshest terms. I set out the facts and described how the meeting had gone, what

had been said to me and what I had done in response. I suggested outright that Claudia Katz was acting to blacken my company's name and would stoop even to outright slander to do it.

In theory, a paper like that should have blown the ministry apart.

So serious an accusation demands a serious inquiry. If I am wrong and am smearing the head of the Employment Department, I should be called to account. If I am right, then Claudia Katz should answer for blackening my name and falsifying the minutes.

So I will ask again, as we Jews like to do: and what do you think of that?

Nothing. Silence.

It seems that every authority, without any prior agreement, threw my rebuttal in the bin.

One has the feeling that the ministry decided not to stir up an unpleasant story. And yet any decent minister in any civilised state would have had to find out what lawlessness was going on under his nose. Which of the two parties accusing each other of breaking the law was right, and which was wrong.

Had my document been acted on, there would have been an inquiry involving the legal department. Suppose they had wanted to hold me liable for libel: then the ministry would have had to prove in court that I had libelled them. They were plainly afraid of things taking that turn, and once again acted on the principle that one hand washes the other. Otherwise, why did my explosive paper vanish without trace?

The hunch that the Absorption Ministry is run like a private shop seemed to be confirmed once again.

Incidentally, the Jewish Agency awarded Status a certificate of honour for its flawless implementation of *Aliyah 2000*.

And I was left with the feeling that the Absorption Ministry and the Agency had been running the same project in two different countries. In one, the law and obligations to people are upheld; in the other, people are casually sold down the river for the sake of someone's interests.

Which country will we end up in, in the end?

We await with impatience an answer from the police, the State Attorney's Office and the State Comptroller.

Scene Two: Letters from the Theatre of the Absurd

...neither deal falsely, neither lie one to another.
Leviticus 19:11

By now, dear reader, you are probably concluding that my story is about a senior official who threw all her personal energies into destroying one particular company. In her own personal interests.

I agree it is hard to believe.

What if the psychologists of the ministry's *Ahven* project weren't deliberately steering prospective students away from Status at all, and it was simply a coincidence?

What if my many complaints to the ministry really did go unanswered for so long because the department had more than enough on its plate without me?

And what if I am simply imagining that Mrs Claudia Katz let my company get involved in *Aliyah 2000* and promise people every kind of help, and then forced us to choose between running the project at a loss or dropping it and disgracing ourselves before everyone involved?

Let me tell you how the next blow fell on Status. And if we accept that such things are no joking matter, we will see that this blow was aimed at my company, and by Mrs Katz in person.

I have said that Status worked mainly with new immigrants. That is not easier but harder. To interest someone who has only recently arrived in the country, we had to keep improving our work, creating new courses and refining the ones we had. My instructors and I believed that the learning process had to be flexible. Practically every group of students needed its own approach. What matters, after all, is to put a profession in people's hands quickly and well.

It was in our own interest to train a person properly so that we could place him in a job. I always used to say: if we have trained someone but

not placed him, we have done only half the job. And half the job means only half the pay.

My company was clearly motivated to achieve a high placement rate, and so we achieved very impressive results.

Our future students came to us first. If they liked what Status had to offer, they signed a training contract with us and then went to the Absorption Ministry for a voucher. This is common practice: the immigrant submits to the ministry a set of documents from the training organisation he has chosen, and on that basis he is given a voucher.

And then we received yet another greeting from the Absorption Ministry: an official letter from the Employment Department. Claudia Katz demanded that we give our future students who were applying for vouchers letters of guarantee stating that Status would place every one of them in a job.

It was an absurd demand, for three reasons.

Reason one. It is training centres that work with Absorption Ministry vouchers. And in our case the letter was addressed to a school, not to an employment company. Let me say straight away: demanding such guarantees from training centres is utter madness, and simply illegal too. Training centres do not place people in jobs; that is not within their remit. For that you need the qualifications and the authority of a recruitment agency, and a licence from the Ministry of Labour. Recruitment has its own difficulties and its own professional skills. If placing people in jobs were that easy, the state could do it itself and there would be no need for recruitment agencies, of which there are more than a thousand in the country. And if anyone decides to place people in jobs without a Ministry of Labour licence, then under the law of the State of Israel that is not even an administrative offence but a criminal one.

The demand for letters of guarantee was therefore unlawful in principle. In our case the ministry's demand was addressed specifically to the school, Status School, yet concerned employment, and schools do not do employment. Our company Perfect Plus did, but it had no connection with vouchers or the Absorption Ministry, so the ministry could demand

nothing of it. In other words, it is completely unclear from whom Claudia Katz wanted these guarantees.

If any training centres with no right to place people in jobs did take on such obligations at the time, they simply broke the law and exposed themselves to criminal liability. And all of it at the behest of the Employment Department and of Claudia Katz in person!

Reason two. The new demand had no legal force as regards Status in particular. We signed training contracts with the individual, the future student, not with the Absorption Ministry. We had no legal relationship with the ministry, so the department had no right to impose any obligations on us.

Reason three. In effect we were being required to give fantastical guarantees: a placement rate of one hundred per cent. That is impossible even in theory. There is a science called andragogy, which deals with methods of teaching adults. Its laws are somewhat different from those of pedagogy, the science of teaching children and young people. Research shows that for adults who have started learning something new, a subsequent placement rate of 35 to 40 per cent is considered a great success. To Status's credit, we almost doubled that figure. Partly because we had good "raw material": immigrants from the former CIS countries with a high level of basic education, used to hard work and aware that they had families to feed.

But one hundred per cent is still impossible! A great deal can change in an adult's life: he marries, divorces, has children and even grandchildren, relatives die. And under the pressure of circumstances he may well change his mind about taking the job we have found for him. Such cases are a minority, of course, but they happen. Besides, a middle-aged person doesn't have the energy and decisiveness of a university student. An adult is usually no longer sure you can turn the world upside down just by wanting to. He tends to be cautious, to decide and then decide again.

In short, one hundred per cent placement is impossible to guarantee!

And anyone who undertakes to guarantee such results is lying. And lying is wrong.

If an official honestly, without ulterior motive, wants such unscientific results, his professionalism is open to doubt.

And if an official has forgotten the legal and logical basis for his fairy-tale wishes, one cannot help wondering whether he deserves his place in the ministry.

It remains to suppose, and what else can one do, that Claudia Katz is completely incompetent in her field. She made demands of training organisations that are unlawful, illogical and unscientific.

Hard to believe, isn't it? That one of the departments of the Absorption Ministry is run by an amateur?

Here is another supposition. Claudia Katz understood perfectly well how absurd the new rules were. Which means she knowingly used the powers the state had given her to create unlawful tools for manipulating private business.

With tools like that you can destroy any company you dislike. Nobody can grant fantastical wishes, except perhaps the golden fish of the fairy tale.

And more than anything, it looked like yet another direct blow at Status.

Why Status, you ask? I repeat: we were the only company, or at least one of very few, that both trained and placed people, with the right to do so under a Ministry of Labour licence. I suspect that the whole business of the letters of guarantee was started to create a pretext for barring Status from working with training vouchers, and that was a crushing blow to our business. I imagine that Claudia Katz, having tired of looking for lawful grounds to kill my business, set about inventing unlawful ones.

Once again I rushed to Status's defence. I spoke to Mrs Katz. I tried to explain what I have just explained in the lines above: that her demands were unscientific, illogical and legally untenable. I appealed to common sense.

In reply I heard: "Either you issue letters of guarantee as the department requires, or you will no longer work with Absorption Ministry vouchers."

In effect this meant, if not the death of Status, then a slide into a coma.

Working with immigrants from the former USSR was our niche; it was the specialisation I had planned for my business from the start. If immigrants could not get vouchers to study with us, we might as well close, I realised bitterly.

The few who would come to study at their own expense rather than on a voucher could not provide us with a normal profit.

Once again we were being driven into a corner.

My company was put in an impossible position. I even issued such letters of guarantee to a number of immigrants who had signed contracts with Status. I knew it was utterly absurd, but I had no other option. I hoped to buy time to try to prove to someone sensible at the ministry that the new requirements were unrealistic, for my company and for any other. I went round the same offices yet again: the minister's office, the director general's office, the department. And yet again I could not get anyone to listen.

Unfortunately, Claudia Katz's war on an honest business proved successful: with the power the state had given her, the official was able to arrange things so that it was utterly impossible to get at the truth, while the head of the department did as she pleased.

About a year later I learned from the Absorption Ministry that they were displeased with us. Official letters arrived from three branches of the ministry saying that Status's work was unsatisfactory. Allegedly, according to their information, among our former students were people to whom we had issued letters of guarantee and then failed to place anywhere. The ministry's authors claimed to have obtained this information by phoning round our former students. On that basis, the three branches were ending all voucher work with Status.

I thought in passing: was Status the only one to receive such letters? And if not, who else? Training centres that have no right to place people

in jobs at all? Even as a hypothesis, the whole thing looked mostly like nonsense and fiction.

Each letter came with a list of fifteen to twenty names. I mention these figures for comparison. Since the business with the letters of guarantee began, we had managed to train and place hundreds of people.

Fifteen or twenty: so small a number really does end up without a job. These are the very people who "changed their minds" whom I mentioned. That, as I have explained, is why one hundred per cent placement is impossible: people are people. After all, a machinist may turn five hundred parts perfectly and scrap ten. A good boss won't sack him for failing to turn a flawless one hundred per cent; that is impossible.

That idea is clear, I think, even to a non-specialist. Yet for some reason it eluded the "professionals" at the Absorption Ministry. So I decided to check which people the authors of the letters from the ministry's branches had put on their lists.

We began checking and were once again amazed at how deeply deceit had become part of the Absorption Ministry's working methods.

The lists included people whom we had in fact placed in jobs. There were people who had not finished their studies with us, for their own reasons, and had not received a diploma, so placing them was never on the cards. And, more interesting still, there were people who had never studied with us at all.

The ministry's staff, sure that they could get away with anything, hadn't even bothered to make these lists look remotely plausible.

They simply made them up!

And on the strength of these letters, Status was stripped of the right to work with vouchers on an equal footing with others.

You must understand that this was done on wholly unlawful grounds, on trumped-up charges, and not trumped up by some huckster in a Jerusalem market, but by a government department!

So we went on existing amid unfair competition artificially created by the Employment Department. We could not fill our groups, because the state would not fund those who wanted to study with us. Yet it funded our

competitors, even those who did not meet the project's rules, without a hitch.

That reduced the number of our students but did not leave us without work altogether: people came to study with us at their own expense too. People knew us and recommended us to friends and acquaintances. For our part, we offered instalment plans to those who wanted to study with us, so that people could finish their training and pay off what they owed. In short, once again we had to wriggle and improvise. Although it is incredibly hard to sell on the market what is given away free elsewhere: an immigrant will naturally prefer to study on a voucher. Living and working grew harder and harder, but there was nothing we could do. Such are our officials.

They sincerely believe that a country can be run like a private shop and its laws set aside; that money can be steered wherever they please, with no regard for the laws of the land or the Absorption Ministry's own regulations.

Claudia Katz wanted to strike a blow at Status and she struck it, but the blow also fell on innocent people.

Immigrants lost the chance to get quality training with us on a voucher, followed by a job. I have said that our company, able to give a person both training and work, was, if not the only one in Israel, then one of very few. Immigrants now had to study at ordinary training centres that do not specialise in finding their graduates work.

Repeatedly, in person and in writing, I laid out my new problems before Minister Sofa Landver. And again it all ended in empty talk and broken promises. Nothing moved. Again I began to suspect: either Mrs Landver was completely in league with Mrs Katz, or she was incapable of ordering her to stop running the ministry, and therefore the country, like her own kitchen. What was the matter? Not enough nerve?

Could it be that Mrs Landver was afraid of her own subordinate? How on earth had Claudia Katz so frightened the minister?

The situation grew more and more absurd. Here are two more examples.

The Absorption Ministry repeatedly hailed Status's projects as highly successful and made films about them.

For instance, about our programme for immigrants from Ethiopia. This group studied on vouchers, and after the business with the letters of guarantee at that. The film had a great deal to say about how successfully the ministry had helped this group of immigrants, how well they had done on their courses, how they had received diplomas and jobs.

And on screen appeared… Status diplomas! On the diplomas, next to our company's name, the Absorption Ministry's logo stood proudly.

So in conversations with me they insisted that my company was not up to scratch and would not be allowed to work with immigrants, while in a film they could happily take all the credit for themselves!

It turned out that when Claudia Katz needed to spin a pretty tale about her tireless care for new Israelis, she had no qualms about using the achievements of people she had been preventing from working properly for years!

It turned out that whenever we managed to pull off a project in spite of the ministry's opposition, the ministry immediately seized on it as an opportunity to report its own brilliant work, in defiance of every notion of decency.

Why, then, did it have to fight us so fiercely?

And here is the second story. After my company had been barred from working with immigrants on vouchers, I learned that the Absorption Ministry was happily paying, by voucher, for studies with some of our unscrupulous competitors.

Their lack of scruples lay in the fact that they provided, to call things by their proper names, virtual training: they had no live teachers or coordinators, not even real premises for classes! The "training" they provided was simply a collection of video clips.

These companies were officially neither training centres nor recruitment agencies, and by law they could not teach anyone. Yet the Employment Department allowed such "schools" to teach immigrants on vouchers as much as they liked!

That is why I believe the blow was aimed exclusively at us. But it fell, I repeat, on entirely innocent people: the immigrants.

And I will say again that I very much hope Claudia Katz and Sofa Landver will one day give honest answers to the police and the State Comptroller.

Let the police and the State Comptroller's office correct me if I am wrong: the Employment Department's actions described in this chapter are breaches of the law; the scam with the letters of guarantee, devised by Claudia Katz, is a serious violation of the rules and legal norms governing a state institution; all these actions were undertaken in order to mislead related state bodies and private individuals, namely the immigrants.

I personally informed Sofa Landver, a minister of the State of Israel, more than once that her ministry's staff were, to put it crudely, doing whatever they liked. I am not a lawyer, a prosecutor or an advocate, so my opinion cannot be an expert one. But to my layman's eye, all this looks very much like a crime.

Minister Landver, again in my view, behaved as a direct accomplice in these dubious affairs. Namely, she ignored my appeals and, as far as I could tell, took no steps to bring her subordinate, Claudia Katz, to order.

Things went on to get even worse, as you will see.

I hope for an appropriate response from the police, the State Attorney's Office and the State Comptroller.

Otherwise, one fine day, we really will wake up in a banana republic!

Scene Three: "What the Common People Call a Gang"

Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment, in meteyard, in weight, or in measure. Just balances, just weights… shall ye have.
Leviticus 19:35–36

The most sensible readers of these lines are probably puzzled: after so many instances of injustice and arbitrary treatment, how could I keep sticking my neck out with new initiatives?

Surely the nail that sticks up gets hammered down, people wise in the ways of the world will say. To which I would have replied at the time: that's what happens in totalitarian states! Ours is an advanced, free country!

I simply could not bring myself to believe that our republic was not a democratic one but a banana one, with banana laws to match.

Besides, I had to keep the business going, because despite the obvious dislike of the powers that be, I had obligations to my students to meet, salaries to pay my staff, rent and taxes to pay.

And then a chance came along that comes once every three years. Or rather, I thought it was a chance. As things unfolded, it turned out to be yet another crafty game…

But let me tell it in order.

Once every three years, the Absorption Ministry held a tender to take part in the state project *Ahven*, the very one with which I had so far failed to make friends. By the time I am describing, Status was standing firmly on its feet and met all the requirements for the tender, even though the outrageous episodes described in the previous chapters had already happened. The Absorption Ministry had managed to deal my company several painful blows, but in spite of the officials' efforts, Status was alive and well, had reached a serious level, and was ready to fight for the right to take part in *Ahven*.

It seemed to me that if my company won the tender and began real, professional work within *Ahven*, we would become part of the ministry's programme, and they would finally leave us in peace and stop putting pressure on my business.

We would then have become a handy tool for the ministry to paint a picture of how effectively it worked. The department had already tried to pass off our successes as its own, as I described in the section on the letters of guarantee. And if we were part of the state project, life would be easier for everyone, in my view. Claudia Katz would no longer have any reason to spend her precious life fighting me, since only fools saw off the branch they are sitting on. And I would be spared the need to keep fending off

attacks and set-ups, could breathe out and move up to the new level Status had long deserved.

Under the tender rules, the bidders were to be licensed recruitment companies. To compete, they had to sign agreements with licensed training centres. Ordinary companies had to invest substantially: some had to find partners, some to refurbish premises, some to recruit new staff.

But mine was not an ordinary company. I have mentioned that the employment company and the school were both part of Status, "under one roof". We had everything in order: classrooms, computers, equipment, staff. Unlike the other bidders, we wouldn't even have had to change our working hours to become full participants in *Ahven*.

I read the tender documents in amazement: they practically described my company. It was doubtful anyone could compete with Status in how closely our profile matched the conditions of the contest. We must go for it, I decided; fate itself is smiling on us. Sensible people cannot fail to see that we will be of great benefit to the project. The tender had been signed by a number of Absorption Ministry representatives besides Claudia Katz (as if it could be without her!), and I had no reason as yet to doubt their good sense. They must see that the benefit would be great, and mutual. Only now do I see my naivety; at the time it all seemed logical. This is a state competition, I told myself. There must be a strict system of checks, fair play, no arbitrary decisions. In keeping with the ancient wisdom, everyone will be judged by one just measure.

Only later did I learn through my own channels that for the previous twelve years the tender had been won by the same few companies, no more than five. For appearances' sake they were simply "shuffled" and assigned to regions. This is information from my sources, and I cannot vouch one hundred per cent for its accuracy, because my sources are by no means the police, the State Comptroller's office or the State Attorney's Office. Those respected bodies are perfectly able to check my information. I suspect they would find it interesting.

But I digress.

Preparing a tender bid is an enormous job. Every agreement with people and organisations must be in place by the time the documents are submitted. The bid pack itself, still blank, has to be bought. The requirements for filling it in are truly draconian: the wrong font, the wrong wording, and your pack will be ruled non-compliant and your company will be off the list of bidders. And so, after immense labour and sleepless nights, we submitted a stack of hefty completed booklets and began waiting for the results.

The Absorption Ministry's committee started dragging its feet. We had a distinct feeling that they were frantically deciding what to do with us. They had no right to stop us buying and submitting the bid pack: we may be a banana republic, but not to that extent. I suspect that in that tender we were a bone in the throat not only for Claudia Katz's department but for all the other bidders, who had been diligently working on that tasty morsel for more than a decade. And so the committee began inventing ways to keep Status off its patch.

They dragged it out for months!

The first attempt to keep us out was laughable. I got a call saying the committee somehow couldn't find the bank guarantee for 50,000 shekels that had to accompany the bid pack. Without so important a document the pack could not be accepted for the competition, and don't even try to get a new copy of the guarantee, because nobody is going to wait.

Suddenly they were in a terrible hurry, although before that I had waited weeks for so much as a word from them. No problem, I replied. I had played it safe, since anything can happen, and had got three certified copies of the guarantee from the bank at once; I would bring them the other two within the hour. Before I had even started the car, the committee called back: "A little mistake, we've found your guarantee, don't trouble yourself to come." Well, fine. We had a laugh.

The next attempt to throw us out of the tender was made by the head of the Employment Department in person. She had evidently realised that she wasn't going to get round me by devious means and had to do the plotting herself rather than through the committee's clerks. Claudia Katz's

assistant rang to tell me that the woman I was nominating as director of the *Ahven* branch in Haifa was unsuitable for the post, so our participation in the tender was once again in serious doubt. Why unsuitable, I asked. I have the tender conditions right here, and my candidate meets the stated criteria: education, experience, fields of work. Tell me what it is about her that your department doesn't like. Embarrassed, no doubt, by my insistence, Mrs Katz's assistant promptly gave her patroness away. She told me the following: Mrs Claudia Katz has said that she personally will not let your candidate through. Why not? I don't know, perhaps your candidate is too young.

That was something new.

Of course, such a decision was unlawful personal arbitrariness on the part of the department head. Nowhere in the tender rules was a minimum age for candidates specified, so age was governed by the ordinary law of the State of Israel. But so absurd an explanation, even if it was voiced merely by the department head's assistant, was entirely in the spirit of that whole department, and of Claudia Katz in person. One would not have been surprised if they had made up on the spot a rule barring "too beautiful", "too clever" and "too decent" candidates from tenders. Beauty is an abstract notion, but in my observation the too clever and the too decent really don't last long in the Employment Department.

So, the assistant went on, here is an option: you quickly find another candidate of the same calibre, so that the replacement is equivalent and acceptable to the department. You have a week. Otherwise the tender goes ahead without Status.

The demand was practically impossible to meet. Top-class specialists don't grow on trees. We had almost given up hope when we had incredible, fantastic luck: one of my staff found a worthy candidate who had worked for many years at the Joint, on employment projects specifically. This lady's experience and qualifications were of such a level that Claudia Katz herself could not have competed with her. And we were lucky again in that the woman readily accepted the position I offered her. She explained that she had already achieved a great deal and now wanted

to spend more time with her family, and a job close to home would suit her.

Scarcely believing my luck, I sent the ministry the details of the replacement candidate.

And then one fine day, at half past eight in the morning, I was sitting at work. I needn't have been there so early; I didn't always come in first thing, since there is business outside the office too. The phone rang: "Hello, this is the Employment Department. We've received your documents on the change of candidate. Mrs Claudia Katz wishes to see you and your new candidate in person to approve her, but only today, by twelve noon. Very, very little time, you know. If you don't arrive by midday, your participation in the tender is off the table."

I had the feeling I was talking to the godfather of a Sicilian crime family. But feelings could wait. How on earth were we to make it?

Picture it, dear reader: I'm in my office in Haifa, it's nearly nine, my precious new colleague is at home in Kiryat Yam, perhaps still asleep, and we have to be at the ministry in Jerusalem by noon.

I ring the lady: "Here's the situation. I'll be outside your door in fifteen minutes. Get ready, fast!" All she could manage in reply was "*Oy vey!*"

In short, I drove to Jerusalem like a madman, while my colleague powdered her nose, put on lipstick and fitted her earrings right there in the car. The Lord God, seeing how hard we were trying, cancelled the customary traffic jam at the entrance to Jerusalem that day, which simply saved us. Parking properly was out of the question; I just abandoned the car wherever I could. We burst into Claudia Katz's waiting room at a quarter to twelve. "Ah," said the head of the department, "it's you. I know Mr Feldman has proposed you for the post of branch manager in Haifa. Your CV and experience are very impressive. I approve. I won't keep you any longer."

Believe it or not, a minute later we came out of Claudia Katz's office.

Genuinely bewildered: what on earth was that?!

I suspect that Claudia Katz, an authoritarian official, is utterly convinced that she has only to snap her fingers and any businessman will

gallop to her from any corner of the country in no time, lathered like a horse. Or perhaps she wouldn't have run just anyone around like that, and this ploy too was aimed at me personally? Had we walked into her office at one minute past twelve, we would evidently have heard: "Time's up, candidate not approved, goodbye, now get out of the tender." A logical scenario, given all of Claudia Katz's earlier tricks against me and my company.

But in the case of that summons to the ministry, God watched over me once again.

We got there in time, and before that we had managed to overcome the other obstacles too. The committee had no way out: they admitted us to the competition. Figuratively speaking, they let us into the ring and even gave us a towel.

The ring is a fine image, but in reality the bidders' fate is quietly decided by the committee. There is no actual "fight" as such.

The results are announced to the bidders afterwards, and you may count yourself lucky if the officials answer your questions.

And so, after the appointed time, we learned that the tender had been won not by us but by other companies, two or three of them. We hadn't met some criteria or other; oh well, what can you do. We could voice our suspicions about the honesty of the ministry committee's actions only to one another. At the Absorption Ministry everything is arranged so that getting at the truth and understanding how things work is practically impossible. As a consolation prize, we, like all the bidders, were entitled to collect our bank guarantee and a copy of the committee's official decision.

And here Providence decided to lift the veil of secrecy on the great state tender for me. The path by which the information reached me was truly mystical.

Judge for yourself. A colleague I had sent to the ministry to collect our pack arrived on the wrong day by mistake.

The ministry lady responsible for these documents was not in. In her office sat another lady, who had nothing to do with the tender and knew

nothing of all the behind-the-scenes manoeuvring. Besides, she was presumably just kind by nature and saw no point in making trouble for people out of nothing. A rare case at the Absorption Ministry!

My colleague complained to this lady: how annoying, she had got the day wrong, now she would have to trek from Haifa to Jerusalem all over again, lose another day, the boss would be cross; couldn't she be helped somehow?

"All the tender documents are in that drawer over there," replied the official, plainly unwilling to think about anything she hadn't been told to think about. "Take them and photocopy whatever you need. What's the problem?"

My colleague reported by phone that she had been handed a drawer containing every secret of the state tender. I authorised her to spend as much as a thousand shekels on copying and to copy everything she could while she had the chance.

That is how confidential Absorption Ministry information fell into our hands. Had my colleague not mixed up the day she was due at the department, we would never have learned some fascinating details about how the state tender was run. I should note that there was nothing criminal in what my employee did: access to the documents was given to her not by a cleaner with a mop, but by a responsible ministry official. The copies were made entirely officially, and the copying was paid for in the proper way.

We began reading our haul. The further we got into the documents, the further our eyes popped out of our heads.

To begin with, the bids of the companies that won the tender were riddled with formatting errors, and this when the requirements for presentation and fonts were, as I have said, extremely strict. Computer-typed only, in the David 12 font only! Any other font, and under the tender rules the documents became invalid. But in this state tender, the "weights and balances" were by no means the same for everyone!

And in the winners' commercial proposals, many figures had been written in by hand, which is quite unacceptable. You may think, dear

reader, that I am muddling your head with silly details, but these are no details at all. For violations like these, and even smaller ones, my Status, for instance, would have been struck off immediately. Yet the company declared the winner had filled in even its commercial proposal in breach of the rules. That matters. It most likely means that these documents were filled in later than the tender rules allowed, that is, after the fact. Logic suggests that the "winners" and the committee did not know, until the last moment, what figures we would put in our commercial proposal, and wrote their own figures in by hand, right there at the committee meeting. A bidder who submitted documents like that should have been disqualified.

And those bidders actually won! Something's not right here, is it?

We read on, and it gets more interesting still. Among the candidates for the post of psychologist we see the same person we had put in our own documents. That is allowed: a psychologist is simply hired, and goes to work for whichever company wins the tender. Well, as the winning company's candidate, this person was rated very highly, while in our bid the same person was rated very low. So had this specialist worked for us, he would have counted as a poor psychologist, but with the winners his qualifications would magically rise. You can see what "honest, unrigged" tenders we have!

Next we see the same story with the teaching premises. In our bid we had listed an office already belonging to *Ahven*, by agreement, of course. And our fortunate rivals had listed the same office in their documents. Again, had we been renting those premises, they would have received a lower score than if the winning company were renting them. Same address, in Ashdod!

My company received a very low score for its computer facilities. Quite inexplicably: Status was a partner of Microsoft and Cimatron, and all the retraining of Cimatron's staff took place at our schools. So we maintained the highest standards in computer equipment; we taught subjects such as three-dimensional modelling, which require very powerful, state-of-the-art computers that not every computer school has.

As for our winning competitors, I later saw old boxy monitors in their offices with my own eyes.

Well, monitors aren't the main thing. The interesting fact is that, even before the tender began, my computer rooms were inspected by my favourite Israeli official in person: Claudia Katz. She came accompanied by two ladies of advanced years who would hardly have been able to say with confidence which button switches a computer on. Neither these ladies nor Mrs Katz herself went into our computer classrooms or switched on a single computer. Yet afterwards, in the tender documents, our computer facilities received a rather low score.

Galling, isn't it?

More galling still was to see a very low score for our experience of working with immigrants, since there was a criterion for that too.

We, of all people, lacked experience with immigrants?! By the time of that tender we had been working with them for more than ten years!

Immigrants made up more than eighty per cent of our students and of the people we placed. Companies and corporations paid us for our graduates: ask them how well we turned yesterday's Soviet teachers and lab assistants into specialists! Or does the Absorption Ministry have a different idea of what successful work with immigrants looks like?

Or had we once again been crudely pushed away from a "juicy" project, by any means necessary, so that the tasty morsel could be handed out as they saw fit?

I won't weary you, dear reader, with a detailed account of how many such false scores we were given on the most varied points. In short, more than a dozen. We were plainly being artificially pushed out of the contest. I will say only that this is how people act when their concern is not quality training, not the new citizens who have come to the country, but exclusively their own interests.

I was left either to cherish what Ostap Bender called "an idiot's dream", or to start looking at reality with open eyes.

Let us recall the question that the Roman judge Cassius Ravilla devised more than twenty centuries ago for every hard-to-explain case: "Who benefits?"

And let us consider: who?

I have said that there were several committee members signing the decisions, about seven. But I was astonished to learn that Mrs Claudia Katz's special powers were written into the tender rules themselves. There was a clause stating that her personal assessment of a bidding company carried a full 20 per cent of the weight. In other words, Mrs Katz's personal liking or dislike outweighed every advantage or drawback. A bidder could offer the best terms, brilliant specialists, attractive prices, but a 20 per cent margin secured simply by one official's opinion could cancel out all its efforts, on the principle of "I just don't like you!"

Claudia Katz's influence on how a bidder was scored was decisive. She could in effect single-handedly choose the "best" company and entrust it with public money! And the tender involved hundreds of millions of shekels.

Out of grey antiquity there simply rises the shade of the Roman jurist Cassius Ravilla, with his insistent question: who benefits?!

And Comrade Cassius would probably also ask who devised such a tender, and how it got past the special committee that is supposed to check tenders for compliance with the law and common sense. What law gives one person a 20 per cent margin in decision-making? And how did several Absorption Ministry officials sign it off at once, while of sound mind and memory?

At this point in our imaginary investigation, Cassius would be elbowed aside by the hero of the Soviet detective series *The Meeting Place Cannot Be Changed*, brilliantly played by Vladimir Vysotsky, who would deliver his famous verdict: and so a criminal association arose, what the common people call a gang.

A gang, precisely, is a group of people united by a single scheme that benefits them. The word is not part of a lawyer's professional vocabulary.

What the right name is for Claudia Katz's circle of like-minded people, let the police and the prosecutors decide. I have long been urging them to.

And the gang did everything to keep a significant new player, in the form of Status, off its patch. Even with the enormous 20 per cent lever on decisions personally guaranteed by Claudia Katz, they committed a host of fiddles and crude moves to try to knock us out of the tender. That is how badly the gang wanted to keep anyone unwilling to make a deal away from its pie. Profit matters far more, and it is plain to see.

If my reasoning is wrong, let the law enforcement bodies correct me, but all this looks very much like disposing of state funds at one's personal discretion.

The personal discretion, evidently, of whoever is in charge. Whoever holds 20 per cent of the power. Logical?

With roughly this set of arguments I went to see Minister Sofa Landver. Simply because a boss ought to know what her subordinate is up to, although I had already set out to Mrs Landver several times the facts confirming the officials' lawlessness in the Employment Department; you read about those attempts in earlier chapters. I also complained to the Absorption Ministry's director general, Dmitri Apartsev. In effect, they ignored my appeals, just as they ignored the questions Knesset members raised at my request. As on previous occasions, I could not break through the wall of indifference and cynicism.

I had the impression that the extent of my knowledge, all the facts and documents I held, had rather frightened the minister: what if the internet and the wider public found out about the state tender, about *Aliyah 2000* and about the immigrants? And six months after the tender, the *Ahven* project was closed. After more than a decade of work, with no reason given. As a taxpayer, I had the right to ask the ministry why a state project had been closed. What if it were vitally important to me? I asked, officially and repeatedly. Naturally, I got no answer. It seems a taxpayer may request information, but nobody guarantees he will receive it. Entirely in the spirit of the Absorption Ministry, although legally that is not allowed,

of course. Incidentally, less than a year later the project was reborn under another name, with much the same aims.

So that too was a feint to avoid answering questions: they simply changed the sign over the shop.

It only remained to suppose that I was dealing with a single close-knit gang, which included both the minister and the ministry's director general, and that this gang had no intention of letting just anyone win state tenders with budgets of hundreds of millions of shekels, still less of explaining its actions to anyone.

I went to the people's elected representatives. Several Knesset members sent parliamentary questions about the state tender to the Absorption Ministry. The department ignored them. But, seeing that the problem was ceasing to be an internal ministry matter, they prepared another vile blow for me, which I will come to. I will tell you whom else this gang drew into its ranks in order to go on defending its own interests.

I am telling you all this, in fact, to stop the malignant tumour spreading across the whole country. Otherwise, before long, there will be no country.

The State of Israel will turn into a private shop, run, what is more, by a shameless and greedy owner. And decent people, seeing the arbitrariness and lawlessness, will leave for other countries.

Is that what we want?

Scene Four: The Wrong Comptroller

...nor honour the person of the mighty: but in righteousness shalt thou judge thy neighbour.
Leviticus 19:15

Here is a very short story that proves everyone in the Absorption Ministry's corner offices is in it together.

After the tender affair I still hoped to put things right by peaceful means, as they say, without bringing out heavy artillery such as the police. Going to the police could have caused me problems with other ministries besides the Absorption Ministry. A ministry in Israel (as in many other

countries, of course) is a heavy, sluggish machine that runs on set routines. If a company has a problem, its licence is suspended first, then comes an unhurried inquiry, and very often they look into it fairly and reinstate the licence, but by then the time is gone. It had already happened once: my favourite Israeli official, Claudia Katz, had tried to get at my business through the Ministry of Labour, and as a result my Tel Aviv branch was left out of state programmes for more than a year, while my competitors took full part in them. That, as you will appreciate, means losses in both money and reputation, and a much smaller pool of potential clients. Knowing Mrs Katz's dubious methods, and guessing that the minister herself would always back her, I was wary of any "sudden movements". The company had to keep working and meet its obligations to people and organisations.

Every ministry, as is well known, has a person whose title is "ministry comptroller". I knew this, of course, but had never looked into what sort of comptroller that was. There had been no reason to, nor any time. It was logical to suppose that this responsible person was probably answerable to the State Comptroller of Israel and was placed in the ministry specifically to check the work of its departments and put things in order. So that is who I would take my problem to. Or rather, the woman who held the post: Mrs Tali Bouadana.

I showered the ministry comptroller's office with letters and complaints. Once or twice I even received the official standard brush-off: received, under review, await a reply.

I used some of my connections and got hold of Tali Bouadana's direct line. I rang her several times, told her about my problems and asked whether there was a lawful way of getting to the bottom of them.

And so the ministry's comptroller, to bring our third or fourth phone call to some kind of end, said: "All right, I'll call in at your office. I'll be in Haifa on ministry business on such-and-such a day, and I'll drop by."

And would you believe it, she actually came!

From the doorway, Mrs Bouadana announced that she had an hour and a half at most to talk about my affairs. I was ready. Copies of the

documents and of my copious correspondence with official representatives of the Absorption Ministry were already on the table, filling two fat files. I began my story: a cross between a detective novel and a Shakespeare play.

In the end, Mrs Bouadana spent, I give you my word, seven hours in my office instead of an hour and a half. She probably hadn't expected to see such a volume of documents pointing to unlawful actions, deceit and falsification at the ministry where she worked. Time and again she said: "That can't be!" Just as I once had, at the start of my "behind-the-scenes struggle" with the Employment Department. The comptroller was, without exaggeration, in shock. After roughly her sixth cup of coffee and her twenty-first or so "That can't be!", Mrs Bouadana firmly promised to get to the bottom of it. For my part, I handed the official two volumes of copied documents and assured her I would wait for her answer just as a child waits for his birthday.

A week went by, two weeks, a month. I rang, of course: patience is not made of iron.

I was told an inquiry was under way. You yourself dumped three kilos of documents on us, the implication was, so now wait until it's all been checked.

There was no concrete answer to my problems after a month and a half, or after two months either.

I rang Tali Bouadana a few more times, and then she started rejecting my calls. I realised that the lady's reserves of conscience and patience had run out. Her burning desire to look into the facts I had presented had clearly cooled. I wasn't even surprised: the woman sits in the Absorption Ministry, and you will have grasped by now what the atmosphere is like there.

I sent an official letter to the ministry comptroller's office, and more than one. In them I demanded an official answer to my requests, in specific terms: what assessment did Mrs Bouadana give to the information I had presented about breaches of the Absorption Ministry's regulations, about falsified documents and the other outrageous facts? In the time Tali

Bouadana had spent getting to grips with the case, even a non-specialist could have seen that something smelled very fishy and that a criminal investigation was a very real prospect.

And given that the ministry's director general and the minister had been informed by me more than once of all the violations, the affair looked like a collective conspiracy involving the department's most senior people.

In my letters I asked Tali Bouadana to answer: either an official inquiry would be scheduled by such-and-such a date, or the ministry comptroller considered the situation I had described a new version of normal, and these were now the rules for anyone working with the Absorption Ministry.

This fascinating one-sided correspondence went on for more than a year! And then I received an official letter from the ministry comptroller's office. It was signed by an employee unknown to me named Faraj and consisted of barely a dozen words. The distant stranger Faraj reported: the documents you submitted have been reviewed; no violations were found.

I rang the ministry comptroller. "Mrs Bouadana," I asked, "who is Faraj? My official meeting in my office was not with Faraj but with you. I handed the copies of the documents proving the lawlessness at the ministry to you personally. I don't know which documents the esteemed Faraj saw; he doesn't say in his letter. Whether he saw all the documents, whether he even saw my documents, I have no information! You yourself, when you looked at the documents in my office during our official meeting, were far from thinking that in my case 'no violations were found'. If you consider the inquiry closed and trust the subordinates you asked to carry it out, Faraj or anyone else, then please sign the letter officially, with your own signature. Then I can take that letter, and all the documents you saw, further. I'll go to other organisations that can establish whether your review was sound. I'll know then that you consider everything happening to me and my company no cause for concern. Only sign the letter yourself!"

"You know what," the comptroller replied, "don't you tell me where to put my signature."

That was the end of our communication. She never answered my calls again.

While I was waiting for Mrs Bouadana's response to my complaints, I found out what sort of post it actually is, this Absorption Ministry comptroller. It turned out that the person works strictly within the department and is answerable to the minister. That is, the post nominally monitors order in the department but is not an independent watchful eye, unlike the "big" State Comptroller, who is elected by the Knesset.

The arrangement sits ill with common sense, but as I have said, ministries live by their own schemes. It is certainly more convenient: the oversight unit reports to the ministry's top people and so cannot oversee them in any way. How can you point out your direct boss's mistakes? I have already told you that a state official in Israel is like a demigod and prizes his position extraordinarily, which means he keeps his head down. The system had once again triumphed over reason and logic, and over the law while it was at it.

I came up with two versions of how Mrs Bouadana acted once she had the facts and documents from me.

Version one. Perhaps she really did honestly try to get to the bottom of it and do her professional duty. I would like to think that Tali Bouadana turned out to be a genuinely decent person. After all, I have no grounds for claiming otherwise. She presumably had to ask for explanations from my favourite senior officials of the State of Israel, Claudia Katz and Sofa Landver. What else could she do, as the minister's direct subordinate? And then, in the style of my favourite ministry, pressure may have been put on Mrs Bouadana; it may have been made crystal clear to her that nobody had any interest in an honest inquiry in this case. It may have been hinted that others would be glad to have her job. And for an official, the threat of losing her state post is more frightening than the threat of going against her conscience.

There is also a second version. Perhaps I am idealising Mrs Tali Bouadana. Suppose she knew my backstory and had no intention of helping me. Simply because, in her position as a "decorative" comptroller,

that is difficult in any case. But you have already grasped the Absorption Ministry's methods, and the ministry comptroller has no reason to work differently. Namely: promise to look into it, and drag things out for as long as possible. While they look into it endlessly (for real, or pretending to), time works for them and against me. I can't move on to other authorities and organisations that might deal with the lawlessness at least somehow. The business suffers, work stalls. The company was already having to operate in a very crowded market, amid natural fierce competition and the artificial regulation imposed by the Absorption Ministry. And now time was working against us too.

These are my versions. I do not insist that things happened this way or that. If the reader has noticed, I spend a good deal of time constructing my own versions, simply because getting the truth out of the Absorption Ministry is extraordinarily difficult.

Even such serious bodies as the police, the State Attorney's Office and the State Comptroller do not venture to do it.

The real, "senior" comptroller, that is, not the decorative one at the ministry. I have said more than once that the respected bodies that stand guard over law and order must at last examine and weigh the Absorption Ministry's conduct and pass judgement on it. Either all these affairs are declared normal, and violations enter our lives as rules, or they must be stopped under the law, which the State of Israel, for now, still has.

Otherwise our country will turn into a criminal private shop. And then perish altogether. Who benefits from that?

Scene Five: Rafi Ginat's Combina

Thou shalt not go up and down as a talebearer among thy people.
Leviticus 19:16

You have read my earlier stories and understood the conditions in which Status worked for more than six years. Unscrupulous officials at a government ministry disliked us so much that blow after blow rained down on the company, on the most varied pretexts. Yet despite the many

efforts of those who did not care for us, Status went on living, earning and serving people and the state. Not because we were such perfect heroes. Experience shows that a business standing firmly on its feet is not so easy to bring down. A well-run enterprise heals itself. Unless it is killed outright. The killing is still to come.

What saved us first and foremost was knowing how to do the work and, as a result, a good reputation. I have told you that people who got retraining and jobs through us recommended Status down the line to friends, relatives, children and neighbours. I have told you that we occupied the niche of working with new immigrants because we knew how to work with them. I myself came to the country as a very young man and understood what an immigrant needs.

Many officials, though, and not only in Israel, are creatures apart. They are quite prone to forgetting completely how people live outside their own world of rank and privilege. Many Israeli officials are former immigrants themselves. But in some, the memory of that period of their lives is the first thing to wither, and the second is the ability to understand the problems of "new Israelis" and to help them.

After the dramatic stories described in the previous chapters, we had in effect lost many of our resources. We refused to come to terms with the powers that be on their dubious conditions, and so we were cut off.

We had to restructure and work out how to live and work from then on. We found a way to cooperate with the Ministry of Labour, which also issued training vouchers to certain groups: people on low incomes, single mothers, people with disabilities, even former drug addicts and released prisoners. We also worked with Ministry of Defence vouchers, which it gave to discharged soldiers. We concentrated on private sales. Quality retraining is not a cheap product, and sensible people understand that it brings stability and prosperity in the future.

On the whole, we held our ground.

At the same time, I had no intention of letting the flagrant breaches of the law that I had witnessed and felt on my own skin go unexamined. I turned to members of the Knesset. Several parliamentarians sent questions

to the Absorption Ministry. Contrary to the laws of the State of Israel, the parliamentary questions were ignored. My favourite ministry acted, as always, by its own schemes and its own rules.

And another vile blow lay in wait for me and my company.

Once again I will build my version on logic alone, because once again it proved impossible to get at the truth "from the other side". That, as you will have gathered, is normal for our officials. I keep repeating that I have heaps of facts, documents and confirmed information: here, take them, check them, establish at last who is right and who is guilty. But the officials sit in the ministry as if in a fortress, and there is silence.

Although they don't just sit in their fortress. Every so often they come out on sabotage raids. And in the case I am about to describe, I suspect that is what happened.

I suppose the Minister of Absorption, Sofa Landver, and her subordinate (or accomplice?) Claudia Katz felt the situation was getting out of hand. Status was carrying on without relying on the Absorption Ministry, so economic levers of pressure on the company no longer worked. What is more, the head of Status was prompting parliamentary questions to the ministry. Those could be ignored for a while, but evidently not for ever. People engaged in dubious dealings never like awkward questions or unwanted attention to their affairs. In short, I had evidently become terribly inconvenient for the Absorption Ministry's top people.

And so a weapon of well-known properties was brought out against me. There are kinds of weapon that everyone knows when, and on what terms, they are used. It is common knowledge that there are journalists, and there are media hitmen. Their services, like those of any hitman, are bought. History has no example of a professional hitman working for free; he would get a rather odd reputation as a "semi-amateur". As they say: it's business, nothing personal.

But let me tell it in order.

There I was at home on a Saturday, the day the Lord God commanded us to rest from our righteous labours. No such luck. An employee rang me: "I'm watching television. Channel 10 is running trailers for the next

episode of *Kolbotek*. They say they're going to expose the dishonest methods of a certain college. And on screen there's the Status office!" I switched on Channel 10 myself. Sure enough, there were the trailers.

The great and terrible Rafi Ginat himself was threatening us with a media hatchet job. So much for the Sabbath! *Kolbotek* never sleeps!

Rafi Ginat is a well-known man, very popular with a trusting public. You have probably watched his programme *Kolbotek*, a long-running Israeli consumer-affairs show, or at least heard of it. It is a classic specimen of so-called "yellow" media. We all know that the yellow press exists in every free country. It would never occur to me that such a programme should, say, be banned. But one simply needs to know what it is worth: its methods, how truthful it is. And, not least, how far it can be bought. As the saying goes, you have to divide everything by sixteen. Which most of our public cannot do at all. You will soon see why that is dangerous.

The programme had been on air for nearly three decades, and it may well be that in its early days it was relatively honest journalism. But times changed. It is fairly widely known that Mr Ginat's attention to the information around him is very, very selective. He chooses to examine the problems that interest him. Or that someone has interested him in.

An acquaintance of mine, a former journalist from St Petersburg, used to sum up such methods as: "Cash to the till, culture to the masses!"

Sometimes it isn't about money as such, but about other kinds of benefit, such as the patronage of highly placed people. Sometimes one has to do those people's bidding.

Again: nothing personal.

Journalists like that are often brought in when someone too active needs to be quietened down. Most often in politics: everyone knows vivid examples of such TV heroes on Russian or Ukrainian television, for instance. Audiences readily call them "TV hitmen".

Rafi Ginat has not been seen in political battles; *Kolbotek*'s concept is more everyday in any case. In the guise of defending "ordinary people", they attacked companies and organisations that (really, or supposedly)

wronged those "ordinary people". Many will remember the story from six years earlier, when this Robin Hood of television nearly ruined a frozen-food import company by announcing that there were impermissible additives in its frozen fish. A piquant touch was that the laboratory that had done the analysis at the programme's request later declared that the results were incorrect and that it bore no responsibility for how they had been presented on air. Both the laboratory, which took a "nothing to do with me" line, and the programme's editors, who had commissioned the analysis from some odd people unwilling to stand by their own words, ended up looking foolish.

But the public had been thoroughly frightened: people were afraid to buy frozen fish, sales fell by more than half, and retail chains in a panic got rid of their stocks of frozen goods. The thing about television in general, and *Kolbotek* in particular, is that the first word counts for more than the second. The proverbial "ordinary person" is swayed by ringing phrases from the television, and whatever follows them, libel suits, inquiries, expert explanations, no longer registers. Rafi Ginat shouted the word "polyphosphates" from the screen, and everyone was terribly frightened. Later, clever people explained that it was a harmless food additive, not a deadly poison, but the "ordinary person" was no longer listening. To be honest, I don't like the term "ordinary person" itself, or the speculation that surrounds it. Yet many people like being "ordinary", and the interests of "ordinary" people are often deemed the most important. We will come back to that.

Meanwhile, let us move to 2013, when we saw the trailers on Channel 10 for the programme that threatened to expose us. Early the next morning my lawyer wrote an official letter to the *Kolbotek* editorial office. Two, in fact: one to Rafi Ginat as the programme's presenter and one to Rafi Ginat as the channel's CEO. To make it more persuasive. We asked them to postpone the broadcast and send someone from the programme to collect any information they wanted about our work. I was ready to provide documents, figures, facts; I had nothing to hide! I wanted viewers to see that the negative information about my company was a mistake. Clearly,

an investigative report that does not present the accused party's side is unsound and unprofessional. And it looks fabricated in the interests of the accusers.

The TV people did not deign to reply to the letter. After a while I rang. An employee who forgot to introduce himself answered roughly as follows: "We've done our own investigation, we know all about you, you're crooks, we're going to expose you, there's nothing to talk about."

And then I understood that Rafi Ginat, known for his partisanship and his flashy exposés, had been set on me like a guard dog. These "pros" plainly had no need of an interview with me. Nothing surprising about that: I once read an interview with Mr Ginat in which he described the *Kolbotek* team, with evident pride, as stray cats of no pedigree who had never studied their trade at university and had come to television straight off the street. Why be proud that your colleagues "never studied" and came "off the street"? If I had boasted to my clients that my staff and teachers came "off the street", nobody would have done business with me. If you were told at the dentist's that the doctor was "off the street" and had "never studied the profession", would you stay in his chair for long? Yet a TV presenter, for some reason, thinks "off the street" is a fine reference for a journalist.

I will not insult the journalistic fraternity: in my view, the people at *Kolbotek* are not journalists. They really are "stray cats" that will not turn up their noses at any rotten bone. I will call Ginat and his creation what they deserve to be called: TV hitmen.

This crusader against frozen fish had plainly been set on us deliberately, and he was only too glad, because that is his role on television. A hit had simply been ordered on my company, and a hitman is a hitman precisely so that his conscience won't trouble him when he has his victim in his sights.

In the fish story, incidentally, professional journalists (unlike Ginat's "stray cats") did try to get to the bottom of it. They obtained the official opinion of the head of Israel's Fish Breeders' Association, who was very pleased that the frozen-fish importers' business had suffered while sales

of fresh produce had risen by a third. Just the moment to ask, as the Roman jurist taught us and as I have asked more than once in these pages: who benefits? Who gained from Rafi Ginat's anti-fish activity? Surely not "ordinary people"?

Status is not frozen fish. After televised accusations broadcast to the whole country, there was nowhere for us to hide under the counter. And the "ordinary" public believes loud words and frightening images, not calm, reasonable arguments. That is exactly what TV hitmen count on. It is odd that they didn't send a real hitman after me back then, since I had annoyed somebody so badly. But for Status, my life's work, the attack of a television hitman was enough. It was a mortal blow. I see no great difference between a real hitman, who kills people, and a TV hitman, who kills a whole business. As a result of a TV hitman's actions, a company useful to the state and its citizens dies: Status, for instance.

Did the thousands of immigrants who, after his programme, lost the chance of quality retraining and a job say thank you to Rafi Ginat? I doubt it.

A few words about how it looked. You may remember *Kolbotek*'s opening titles: against an alarming yellow background, sinister black figures with knives, handcuffs and snarling dogs follow one another. Frightening already. The programme adored such not-quite-honest techniques as hidden-camera filming. When I watched the episode, I remembered: yes, would-be students had indeed come to my office, provoked me and staged a scene of hysterics. I had looked closely and spotted a concealed camera on them. Rafi Ginat even left in the edited piece the moment I found it and pulled it out: yet another odd display of pride in his own unprofessionalism. Well, they're proud of all being "off the street", so what do you expect?

The programme's direction was quite something. The segment featured a Ministry of Labour contract and a discharged soldier's voucher, both passed off as Status documents. The documents were shown in pieces and out of focus, in the hope that viewers wouldn't have time to read them. One of my accusers sat with his face hidden and his voice altered, afraid

to reveal his identity. I put no faith at all in that device: I knew a television man from Moscow who told me that for his programme (another investigative show) he always cast a friend of his in the role of "the man without a face", for twenty dollars a time.

The dubious characters in the programme did not end with this "man in black". A woman, also with a hidden camera, was introduced off-screen as the wife of one of the main complainants. It later emerged that this man's wife is disabled and moves with difficulty, whereas the person who turned up at my office was a perfectly healthy stand-in. Why did the programme's makers lie and twist things at every step? Because that is *Kolbotek*'s style.

From the Ministry of Labour document (passed off as ours), the makers took a line in which the abbreviation of the IFPSM, the International Federation of Purchasing and Supply Management, appeared with a typo. It made it look as if we were claiming to work with a non-existent organisation, although the mistake was in the ministry's document.

Then the *Kolbotek* crew rang the real IFPSM on camera. They were told, with a laugh, that the organisation named in the document didn't exist, only they did. "And who wrote that?" "Status." "Status? Ah, yes, we've heard of them. Some obscure outfit."

So it looked as if we were getting everything muddled, and respectable organisations wanted nothing to do with us. In fact, to be frank, it was I who had once refused to deal with people calling themselves the IFPSM who were offering a partnership I had no need of. (They proposed putting the IFPSM logo on our diplomas, cheaply: a mere 500 shekels per logo. More than anything, the offer resembled a protection racket.)

But was *Kolbotek* interested in the truth? Hitmen are not interested in the truth at all. Can you imagine a hitman asking his client: "Is it fair to order a hit on this man?" That is completely superfluous information for a hitman.

The programme found several people willing to accuse my company of foul play. In my view, they were a gang, pure and simple, made up of people who themselves owed Status money. That is, under their contracts

they had undertaken to pay for their training and then refused. I suspect that before filming this gang was told: "Tell the camera how Status is trying to fleece poor you. After this programme the company will collapse, and you won't owe anybody anything."

An easy way to avoid paying your debts!

To get ahead of myself: I later took to court everyone who had spoken against us on *Kolbotek*. I sued them not even for libel, but on the substance of their contracts with Status School: who owed money to whom? Some of the cases I won outright, and in others my opponents, on their lawyers' advice, settled out of court to minimise what they would personally have to pay us in compensation.

I would stress that the court of the State of Israel, having examined the cases on the substance of the contracts, found that all our contracts complied with the letter of the law, were correct and showed our fair treatment of students. Had the court found that our contract infringed consumer rights, it would have voided it on the spot!

But the general public, as we recall, cannot "divide by sixteen" and trusts emotions, not facts. The mass audience was left with the impression that my company had cheated someone somewhere. Again, as in the old joke: "Either he stole something, or something was stolen from him, but there's something fishy about it!" You may laugh, but in fact it is no laughing matter. The TV hitman's "bullet" had left the rifle called *Kolbotek*, and there was no getting it back. Lies, slander, unverified information, fiddles, distortions: those were the "bullets" *Kolbotek* fired. They hit the heart of Status, and the viewers' heads along with it. Sadly, it works: this "stray cat" journalism has an effect on the public because it is spectacular. The court that took my side is not public; who will look up its ruling on the internet? But the "wronged" "ordinary" people, the heroes of the *Kolbotek* episode, won the public's sympathy, because people are used to trusting television.

All the weightier on air is the official opinion of a government department. There was such an opinion in the *Kolbotek* episode we are talking about. An official statement by the Absorption Ministry was

quoted in a news ticker running along the bottom of the screen. Where would we be without them? That organisation always has something to say about Status Group!

Cooperation between so serious a department and a yellow TV programme looks a little odd, but it is not unlawful. The content of the statement itself, however, broke the law, in my firm belief, because it contained not one word of truth. It was a lie from first word to last; I say so because the government department was later unable to back up its own words with a single document.

Allow me to weary you a little with the details; it matters. In its statement, the Absorption Ministry says it had received numerous complaints about Status Group: about failure to meet obligations, about taking money and not providing training. The ministry then claims it sent us requests to respond to these complaints.

It goes on to say that Status replied to the ministry in writing, rudely and beside the point. And finally it announces that the Absorption Ministry has completely terminated its cooperation with Status Group.

Some time later, both I and members of the Knesset formally asked the Absorption Ministry for documents confirming the truth of the statement broadcast on Channel 10. The department produced not a single document. Why? If anyone complained about Status, those complaints should be kept on file. If the ministry asked us for explanations, it should have copies of those requests, with outgoing reference numbers. If I replied "rudely and beside the point", my replies should be on file, with incoming reference numbers. Documents of this kind cannot possibly be state secrets or be classified for any other reason.

Yet nobody ever laid eyes on these incoming and outgoing letters, for the simplest of reasons, I suspect: they do not exist. At any rate, I neither received nor wrote anything of the kind.

By the way, a word about the form of this official statement.

An acquaintance of mine, a professional television journalist, watched that episode of *Kolbotek* and was surprised: why was the ministry's opinion, in effect, anonymous? Why wasn't it voiced by a living

representative of the ministry, on camera, with a face and a name? If it reached the editors as an official document, why wasn't the document itself shown, with signature and stamp? If the ticker text was dictated by the ministry over the phone, where is the recording? Could the "stray cats" have written that ministerial scrap of paper themselves? Logical questions.

Let us reason further. Fine, suppose the Absorption Ministry does have all these documents, but for some incomprehensible reason is sitting on them and doesn't want to show anyone. That is not yet a crime. But if officials had repeatedly satisfied themselves that my company was taking money for courses and not providing them, then under the ministry's regulations they should long ago have subjected me to a serious inquiry.

Summoned me before a committee, and more than one. And if I wilfully failed to respond or mend my ways, carried out an inspection. Had violations been found on my part, the case materials on Status should have gone to the police. Yet I received no summons to any committee, no inspectors came to me, and the police never troubled me.

So what follows? Either the Absorption Ministry had long known of violations but concealed the documents and took no action, in which case they are criminals themselves? Or the Absorption Ministry broadcast false information on Channel 10 and slandered my company, in which case, again, they are criminals? And they kept silent because they knew that a lie had been broadcast and they had nothing to back up their words; but the hitman's shot had been fired, and after that it is best simply to "take a pause". For time works for the hitman and his clients while the victim bleeds to death. A government ministry, it turns out, was using the familiar techniques of the yellow press: fire and run for cover; on no account explain anything, never tell the truth, add more fog; the opinion of the crowd will finish the job. Rafi Ginat's own metaphor fits perfectly: stray cats bear no responsibility for their yowling. Into the basement they go, and lie low.

To confirm this, I would add that Channel 10 refused to give me a chance to reply on live television, although they had plenty of live

programmes and it was technically possible. But stray cats do not make a habit of listening to replies to their yowling.

The similarity between the methods by which the yellow programme *Kolbotek* and the Absorption Ministry pursue their goals leads us to another logical thought: that the hitman named Rafi Ginat was hired by a client, the Absorption Ministry.

I can find no other explanation as yet. And I would note that the client who hired *Kolbotek*'s presenter made no mistake and could be perfectly satisfied with him. No professionalism is needed to fire "bullets" of lies and distortion. What is needed is cynicism, the ability to juggle scraps of truth, and a total absence of shame. Rafi Ginat did not disappoint his client.

We already know that someone is always calling the tune for Rafi Ginat. We remember the frozen-fish story: there, the beneficiary was found without much trouble. There was another *Kolbotek* episode in which our Robin Hood exposed a certain international con man. Commentators suggested that the con man really had deceived many people, but that Ginat took him on because he was due to testify in court against Ehud Olmert in the Holyland case. Many will remember, I think. The papers called Ginat "a friend of Olmert's" at the time.

Anyone with eyes could easily see that the broadcasts of "Olmert's friend" and enemy of frozen fish were made to order, and certainly not by "ordinary people". *Kolbotek* merely used "ordinary people" as cover while doing its commissioned business.

So who aimed the rifle called *Kolbotek* at my Status? Who benefited from its ceasing to exist? Evidently those who gave *Kolbotek* a false comment and helped kill my company.

And speaking of the great exposer. Many people know that Rafi Ginat did not last long at Channel 10: he was asked to leave the post of CEO after numerous scandals.

The famous *Kolbotek* ceased to exist a couple of years ago, but this "stray cat" managed to foul my path before it went. The episode is still online to this day, and that played a fateful part in the fate of Status.

Everyone in Israel knows the old Hasidic parable of the rabbi and the pillow. A man who had slandered a rabbi and then wanted to apologise was told by the sage to slit open a pillow and scatter the feathers to the winds; then the sage told him that restoring a good name is as hard as gathering up all the feathers again. In modern society, the role of the feathers is played by the World Wide Web. Rafi Ginat gave my unscrupulous competitors, and my enemies among dishonest officials, a very convincing banner for their war on Status.

We all know that in cases like this, justifying yourself only makes things worse. "He's making excuses, so he must be guilty," the man in the street usually reasons. Yes, I upheld my case in court and proved that it was not I who had deceived those unfortunate "ordinary" people but they who had tried to deceive my company. That is, I restored my good name, at least in law. But reputation is everything, and blackening it was the last step in the process of killing my business. The accomplices in this carefully planned killing, it turns out, were the yellow programme *Kolbotek*, which deliberately fabricated a negative image of Status on air, and the Absorption Ministry, which purposely put out a thoroughly false statement on air. I do not know whether my favourite official, Claudia Katz, or someone from her office had a hand in writing that statement. I can assert nothing: the authorship of the ticker text in the programme has remained a mystery. But the methods are painfully familiar. It was precisely with lies and distortions that Mrs Katz fought my company for years, even before the episode with the TV hitmen.

Even the Knesset could not overcome the lawlessness. I have told you that several parliamentarians sent questions to the Absorption Ministry. Not a single reply broke the silence within the fortress. Dmitri Apartsev, as he was stepping down as the ministry's director general, condescended to answer one member of the Knesset. Mr Apartsev apologised profusely that he had been far too busy to consider the question in all the six months the paper had lain on his desk.

At the end of each story I repeat that a situation in which "big" people and organisations evade responsibility is unacceptable in a civilised state.

The Absorption Ministry's top people must explain why a successful company that brought the state enormous revenue was killed. The alleged accomplices to the killing must answer: the Minister of Absorption, Sofa Landver; the former director general of the ministry, Dmitri Apartsev; the former CEO of Channel 10, Rafi Ginat; and also the unnamed ministry representative who wrote the official opinion of his department and supplied it to *Kolbotek*.

In the *Kolbotek* story I have one more question, for the Ministry of Communications, which licenses television channels. Television channels are not just entertainment. The Israeli public places a high level of trust in television. So programmes must be checked for accuracy by the channel's management. True, in Rafi Ginat's case he was his own management, so that rule did not work. On decent channels, incidentally, this simply isn't done: a CEO doesn't present programmes, he has plenty of other work, and if a working journalist is appointed to run the channel, he leaves the air. Well, that's on decent channels. So in the case of Channel 10, the next level of oversight should have been exercised by the Ministry of Communications.

Otherwise the situation looks very much like the lawlessness one can observe in the notorious banana republics: a ministry issues TV hitmen with licences to pick off the undesirable and takes no responsibility whatsoever for those licences. And the TV hitmen deal with whoever they are set on, wreaking total chaos in viewers' heads along the way. As a result, honest companies perish and people are left without quality services. And all of it to suit dishonest officials who would rather divvy up budget funds than look after the country's citizens. TV hit jobs, unlike real hit jobs, are as a rule unpunishable. The next step is when they stop punishing real hitmen too.

Does the picture resemble our state? Sadly, yes.

And my company was killed by a TV hitman for real. I would like such stories never to happen to other companies. From all this it is a single step to killing the state itself, at the hands of people who have forgotten their

duty for the sake of personal interests. I am writing this book so that this does not happen.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Avalanche

Dear readers, you are probably wondering why, in telling how television was used to strike at my company, I keep repeating words like “hitmen”, “killing” and “death”. Can twenty-seven minutes of a television programme really destroy a thriving, viable business? I would not have believed it myself had I not felt the power of words on my own skin. How strongly a word spoken from the television screen acts on people’s minds! And a word that is a lie through and through, as I described in the previous chapter. But I compare the effect of the so-called “investigative report” aimed at me to a gunshot that sets off an avalanche in the mountains. Until then, figuratively speaking, there had been noise and shouting around me, and the noise had dislodged small drifts of snow from the summit.

Unpleasant, but my company fended them off one way or another. It felt as if snow was constantly being hurled at us in loads of various sizes, but they never cut off our air entirely. After the programme on Channel 10, however, the loads of snow came in an unbroken, ever-growing stream and turned into a deadly avalanche.

No More Money!

I had never imagined that the yellow press in our country had such power over minds and reputations.

After the *Kolbotek* broadcast I seethed with indignation for some time and answered phone calls from family and friends: some sympathised, and to others I had to explain that I was being set up. A few days later the first unpleasant "fruits of free speech" awaited me.

I received calls from two banks that held my company's accounts and provided us with working capital. I was on friendly terms with the branch managers, who invited me to informal meetings. We had never had any complaints about each other.

And then, a few days apart, first the manager of one bank's branch and then the manager of the other told me almost exactly the same thing. Namely: "We know you well, we've worked together for more than ten years and we value you as a reliable client.

But after the programme on Channel 10, your company's level of risk has risen substantially. Of course, we'd rather not believe all the nasty things said about you on screen. But risk is a serious matter, and we must ask you, insistently, to cut back your credit lines with our bank sharply. One might even say we require it. If you don't take steps to reduce your credit lines yourself, we'll do it for you. Though we'd rather not. It pains us too, as they say, but business is business."

Each in turn even heard out my explanations: that I was being set up, that these were officials' games, that I was not in the habit of cheating people. They nodded sympathetically. They said they would give me time to come off the credit lines: a month, even two. But on the main question they were immovable: the risk was too great. I understood them and could do nothing. Only in a bazaar can you ask someone to take a gamble, and if things go wrong, then take a cane and give me a thrashing. A bank is not a market stall. Banks do not gamble with money.

So the first part of the avalanche came down on my head: the company lost its bloodstream, its working capital. Suddenly we had no money for anything.

I spent several sleepless nights thinking about what to do. And I took a very painful decision. I had to wind down the main line of work of the Perfect Plus recruitment company, in effect draining it of its life force.

Many people know of a line of business that staffing agencies have: staff leasing, in which the agency supplies a company with particular workers but keeps them on its own payroll. Large companies often find this kind of "sublet" of staff more profitable, and my company kept quite a number of specialists on its books who worked in factories. Keeping such workers requires substantial working capital, and I no longer had it. So it was this fairly extensive area of our work, which had brought in plenty of money for the company's growth, that I decided to wind down, because there was no choice left. I simply "gave away" the specialists, free of charge, to the factories where they were working, which took them onto their own staff, or transferred them to other recruitment companies. So for those people nothing, or almost nothing, changed. But Perfect Plus was now left with only the part of recruitment work that doesn't bring in as much as leasing: simply finding workers to companies' orders for a broker's commission. Crumbs, compared with our former scale.

I felt as though I had voluntarily cut off my own arm in the hope of saving the rest of my body. And I didn't yet know that the operation would not help.

Lies Do the Job

When I decided to close Perfect Plus's main line of work, I still forbade myself to despair. A huge part of the work remained: training people and placing them in jobs. That didn't have to be done through staff leasing. Many companies and organisations were glad to take on our graduates and pay for them. There was a real chance of holding out for a while, a year, say, by selling courses, including on the private market.

To be honest, I hoped that in a year or a little more the foam whipped up by *Kolbotek* would settle and everything would return to its usual course.

By then we no longer worked with the Absorption Ministry.

They behaved as if the State of Israel were their private vegetable plot and budget money their own purse.

You have seen that for yourselves, having read this far. I have mentioned that the Ministry of Labour also issued training vouchers. For a while after the banks cut off our working capital we were still filling groups, but the number of students fell sharply. The main reason was that the Absorption Ministry kept up its campaign of sabotage against us.

Anyone who came within their sight and mentioned the name Status was immediately advised: "Just type the name into the internet and see for yourself what's out there about this company." That is why I keep calling the blow Rafi Ginat dealt my business a mortal one: search engines bring up a link to his accursed programme first when you type in the name Status, even before our own website. Most likely this is because Channel 10's site carries more weight than any private website. But I don't rule out that so-called "trolls" had a hand in it, deliberately scattering links to *Kolbotek* across the web.

That internet "profession" is known to have spread more and more widely in recent years.

It was a very effective tool for fighting us. Officials at the Absorption Ministry could cite that notorious episode of *Kolbotek* to slander us and call us crooks. "There you are," they said, "see for yourselves, there was even a programme about them, a whole journalistic investigation."

My competitors used this tool too, telling prospective students the same thing. Practically all of them. I by no means wish to say that every businessman in our segment of the market is a shameless cynic. There are normal companies, run by decent people. But when you have a gun, why not fire it? I imagine many of them did it not to harm Status deliberately but simply to sell their own courses. As a result, the damaging information about our company spread across the country like the plague. The Israeli market is very small.

Dark times set in at our company. It seemed as if something had given way in the very foundations. Every businessman knows that the

foundation of his business is people. Colleagues who have been through fire, water and copper pipes together, as the Russian saying has it. Ready to cover each other's backs. And I began to see that many of my colleagues, who until recently had been proud to work at Status, were starting to find the work a burden. I have no thought of blaming them.

One of the main reasons: earnings had dropped sharply. For almost all my staff, a significant share of their pay was commission on sales. And selling courses and filling groups was going worse and worse: with the help of a mendacious TV product, my ill-wishers had pretty thoroughly scared off our prospective students. So pay went down and bonuses vanished. My comrades-in-arms lost heart badly.

To be honest, my colleagues were used to a good working atmosphere free of negativity, and to our affairs going rather well. Now, on top of the financial problems, psychological ones began. And the cause, again, was the episode of *Kolbotek* that had disgraced us before the whole country. It was surprising to realise how many people had watched the programme. Or rather, most of them saw it online; it is very easy to find, even now. I have mentioned that there are technologies that can make any given product very popular on the World Wide Web.

And so one of my employees is summoned by the teacher at her child's school and made to explain, humiliatingly, why she is being shown in a programme "about crooks". Another is asked by her neighbours: "What did you say the place you work is called? Not Status Group? *Oy vey!* And how is it, working there among thieves and bloodsuckers?" On top of all that came frequent and rather unpleasant anonymous calls to our offices: "Is that Status?" "Yes." "We saw the programme about you. You rob poor, unfortunate people. You'll pay for this, just you wait."

I imagine that hiring two or three scoundrels to make calls like that a few times a week is neither expensive nor difficult.

I tell you this because, when my staff began bringing me their resignations one after another, I was not even particularly surprised. That same avalanche principle was at work. We are all human, and devotion to the profession or to the management has nothing to do with it.

Work at the company had stopped bringing them money, satisfaction or a sense of being needed, so they left. What can you do? I had nothing with which to motivate people. When, on top of the lack of money, the lack of work and advertising, and the general pessimism, came telephone intimidation, people decided their nerves were worth more.

A great many people suffered because of Rafi Ginat's lying programme. My staff went through severe stress; some resigned and had to look for new jobs. When my company finally collapsed, thousands of Israelis lost the chance of quality retraining. We were bringing the state revenue. That is why, to repeat my point from the previous chapter, a television hitman is almost as dangerous to society as a real one.

I am writing this so that the police of the State of Israel will take on figures like Rafi Ginat, because they commit acts that lead to the death of successful, useful companies. This harms the market and spoils the lives of the people who built these companies and put their money and life's energy into them, and of the people to whom these companies gave jobs. Not to mention the people who used their quality services.

So if the activities of TV hitmen are not stopped, contract killings of real people will soon be considered normal too. There are countries where that is how things are. But Israel, for now, considers itself a civilised state!

You Can't Stand on One Leg

It was becoming more and more obvious to me that, if not bankruptcy, then serious cuts were needed. We were still teaching people, and some of our courses ran for up to eight months, so the company could not be declared insolvent. But I had to cut branches, simply because I could not "feed" them all. With a heavy heart I closed the furthest first, in Be'er Sheva and Karmiel, then the one in Netanya.

The branches had to finish the courses they had started. That was a colossal loss for me. The Tel Aviv branch was the most expensive, in rent and other costs, but even so we saw everyone through to the end of their training. It is psychologically hard, too, to keep up a system that has no

future. But my duty to my students mattered more to me. In the end I staked everything on the two most reliable branches, Haifa and Ashdod, where I had once started my business.

Back to the story. We now worked only with Ministry of Labour vouchers, which our future students obtained through the employment offices. We were filling groups quite successfully, when suddenly I began to notice problems with the employment office in Ashdod. Its head, a man named Eldad Knafo, was refusing vouchers to people who intended to study with us. This was illegal: an employment office has no right to refuse vouchers to people who wish to study at a school if the school holds a Ministry of Labour licence. Yet for more than a year in Ashdod, no vouchers were issued to anyone who had decided to study at Status School.

They talked dozens, perhaps hundreds, of people out of it!

I spoke to Mr Eldad on the phone many times. He wriggled, promised to look into it, and lied. Under the law it is all very simple: if a school holds a Ministry of Labour licence, anyone wishing to study there must be given a voucher. The Ashdod employment office, under Mr Eldad Knafo, was plainly acting against the law.

Let me describe one case of many. We had filled a full group of twelve people, whose training could have improved our position somewhat. Six of them were to study on vouchers, and without them there was no point in forming the group: it would have been work at a loss. And these six were refused vouchers to study with us, by Mr Eldad personally, as had happened many times before.

I rang him again.

"Is what you're doing legal?" I said. "The employment office in Haifa issues vouchers for our branch there without any problems."

"Then Haifa is breaking the law," he replied, "and we're still in the right."

"But how can that be?" I said. "We have a licence! You can't violate our right to work normally!"

"It's not my own doing," Eldad replied. "I was given instructions."

"By whom?"

"From above."

"What do you mean, 'from above'? Who?"

"Well… From above."

I have a recording of that remarkable conversation, and of many other very revealing conversations with Eldad.

I began to consider what "from above" might mean in this context.

And I remembered that the Minister of Absorption, Sofa Landver, actually lives in Ashdod. The ministry's own website says so quite openly. So she can exert unlimited influence on what goes on in Ashdod. Was it she, from that very "above", who gave the order not to let people study with us? And my favourite official, Claudia Katz, had also once lived in Ashdod. She too had no doubt left some connections there.

It struck me that for years now the Absorption Ministry had reminded me of some Sicilian syndicate with tentacles reaching far beyond its own department. I have already compared these nice people to the mafia in this book. And when the mafia decides to eliminate someone, its rules call for a coup de grâce. The blow to my Ashdod branch looked very much like exactly that. The story of that group of twelve ended badly for us: Eldad acted arbitrarily anyway, half the prospective students were denied vouchers and "dropped out", and teaching a group of six would have been work at a loss to the company. But those six would-be students of ours who were refused vouchers did not go out into the street; they went to our competitors. And for study at other schools the employment office issued them vouchers without question. The sabotage, after all, was aimed only at us. If a person can study for free, on a voucher, somewhere other than Status, he will of course go and take for free what he would have had to buy from us.

As a result of the unlawful actions of the head of the Ashdod employment office, that branch of ours went from bad to worse.

To finish teaching the people we had already enrolled, I had to come to an arrangement with another company. They were our competitors, but decent people. We didn't even have money to pay them. We gave them

the classroom equipment and the curricula we had developed. Anything, as long as they saw our groups through.

I have said that I planned to leave the company standing on two legs, two branches, Ashdod and Haifa, and to hold out with their help. But once one of those legs had been knocked out from under my business, it was hard to stay upright on the one that remained. That truly was a fatal blow.

I suspect that Mr Eldad Knafo, perhaps with the backing of my favourite officials at the Absorption Ministry, imagined himself a petty king in his own domain, free to do as he pleased. In other words, it is all one mafia, used to bending everyone double, treating the state's money as its own and deciding everything as it sees fit.

Let's Look in the Mirror

It became obvious to me that the business was finished. From the moment the critical times began to the moment all of Status's activities ceased, about a year went by. I knew it was heading for sunset. After the episode with Mr Eldad, we still had some students to see through their training. We no longer had the resources for it. New groups were hard to fill. I should say that private students still came to us, encouraged by word of mouth and recommendations from friends and relatives. But there were not enough of them to keep the company afloat. We had had a broad, multi-sided business. When the avalanche came down, the props that remained were not enough.

But, I repeat, back in normal times we had enrolled groups of students whom we had undertaken to train and help find work. And now I personally had to go into debt, take out loans against my own pension fund, and make arrangements with competitors so that the people we had enrolled could finish their retraining with them. It took a great deal of trouble: arrangements with the Ministry of Labour, transferring people from one licensed school to another, financial outlay. I can say with complete certainty that nobody can claim I enrolled him and failed to see

him through. I met every obligation I had taken on while Status was afloat. I did not cheat a single person who signed a contract with me.

Although, between ourselves, I could perfectly well have done otherwise.

There are plenty of examples in our segment of the market of companies declaring themselves insolvent and failing to meet their obligations, citing force majeure. Some may remember such stories with the schools Lebon, Kidma Hatzfonit and Michlala Le'Hasava Miktzoit. They simply spread their hands and declared: "We're bankrupt, and the students can go wherever they like. Finished their course or not, there's nothing more we can do." By law they were fully entitled to. And I, as head of the company, bore no legal liability either, and could quite easily have lain down on the sofa and rescued nobody. And saved, incidentally, more than a million shekels: the company's money and my own. Yet I met all my obligations. Towards the end I often didn't have the money to fill up my car, but I met all my obligations.

You will ask: why? Are you some kind of saint?

God forbid. It's just that all these years I remembered what wise people say: when you look in the mirror in the morning, you should not be ashamed to look. I am not ashamed. When my company was dying, I deceived no one. On the contrary, I put in everything I had, and more, to see honestly through to the end what I was bound to see through. Those are my principles. I look in the mirror without shame.

My favourite officials at the Absorption Ministry, who destroyed my company, a company of great benefit to Israel, no doubt look in the mirror with pleasure every morning too. Only nothing troubles them, because they have a clear arrangement with their consciences. And they are used to regarding the country as their private estate, the state budget as their own purse, and the people of the state as their servants. In their system, everything is in order.

I was troubled by the question: how could I cheat people? The officials who prevented my business from living and doing good never ask themselves that question. They knew perfectly well that if Status perished,

a great many people would have problems. The very "ordinary people", immigrants and others, whom the Absorption Ministry claims to care for day and night. Where these people would go to finish their training, with what money, where they would look for work: none of that interested Minister Sofa Landver, the head of the Employment Department, Claudia Katz, or the ministry's director general, Dmitri Apartsev (now its former director general). Had I abandoned my students in the crisis and declared that the bankrupt company bore no responsibility for their further education, the Absorption Ministry would never have thought of helping these people recover their losses or find work.

The ministry would most likely have pinned the blame for what had happened on Status; it had already done so to other companies. The fate of "ordinary people" is the very last thing my favourite officials care about. They themselves are no ordinary people: they consider themselves demigods and believe that loud words about caring for the country's population are enough.

I am writing this book so that such a system does not become normal.

So that the citizens of Israel do not put up with a system that resembles the mafia. Because the mafia swallows up everything if it is not resisted.

Let me repeat the question I keep asking throughout this book: is there law in the State of Israel, and who stands guard over it, and how? Are we a democratic country or a banana republic?

The police, the State Attorney's Office and the State Comptroller must give a legal assessment of the actions of dishonest officials and their henchmen. Otherwise stories like mine will keep happening, and arbitrariness and lawlessness will take the place of the law.

In Lieu of an Afterword

People write books for all sorts of reasons.

I wrote this book to speak about what matters. To call by their proper names things of great importance to our country. I very much hope this book will be the start of a serious conversation in which important, responsible people take part.

I have told the story of my business because the history of my company is highly revealing, and also because, as a direct participant, I can vouch for its truth.

Through the example of my company, I want to warn other businesspeople, and the whole of Israeli society with them, that there are seats of disease deep within the body of the Israeli state. To attempt a preliminary diagnosis. Preliminary, because I am not a doctor. In cases like the one I have described, the doctor is the state, in the form of its law enforcement and oversight bodies. I would very much like them to make the final diagnosis in this case history, in the form of an official finding. "Diagnosis" comes from a word meaning "recognition". In other words, the first important step in fighting a disease is information about it.

Then comes analysis of the data.

Throughout this book I have compared the processes under way in some of Israel's state bodies to a malignant tumour. If such a disease is not treated, it ends in the death and decay of the whole organism. Spoiling,

depravity, decay: that is how the Latin *corruptio* translates, and it is the root of the word "corruption".

Now let us analyse.

The United Nations, in its reference work on the global fight against corruption, describes the phenomenon as the abuse of public power for private gain.

Recall the conduct of the top officials of my favourite Ministry of Absorption in the story of the state tender. It looks very much like using official powers to keep a slice of the state budget within a particular circle of interested people and organisations.

Let us look at the other criteria by which corruption is defined. Many sources offer definitions, the internet among them.

This one, for example: the use by an official of the powers and rights of office in a way that contravenes the law and moral norms.

The whole story of the letters of guarantee for immigrants flagrantly contravenes employment law.

The representatives of the *Ahven* project and of the Absorption Ministry broke the law when they spread slander about my company.

And did Claudia Katz's department respect moral norms when it deprived immigrants of the chance of quality retraining? And did the television killer Rafi Ginat give a thought to morality while making his lying programme?

Here is something else one can read on the World Wide Web: the systemic nature of corruption shows itself in how it compels those who work in the state bodies it has taken hold of.

The attempts to drag my company into dubious dealings show that the authors of various dubious schemes had no doubt they could compel us to take part. Another name for it is "one hand washes the other": when everyone is tied to everyone else and there is no way out.

Let us try to draw conclusions.

I am not the police, the State Attorney's Office or the State Comptroller. So I can only make a preliminary diagnosis: all this looks very much like corruption. In medicine, too, with dangerous diagnoses,

they first say: there is a suspicion. Further tests are needed. And they entrust them to specialists.

I am not alone in comparing the situation to a disease. Niccolò Machiavelli, the Renaissance politician and philosopher, also likened corruption to consumption, a disease that is far easier to cure when it is recognised early.

Let me repeat once more the thought already expressed in these pages: the situation demands a serious inquiry by the police, the State Attorney's Office and the State Comptroller of Israel. These respected authorities must make the final diagnosis.

As I see it, there are two possible diagnoses.

The first: everything I have described here is no longer considered in Israel to be a dubious scheme or unlawful conduct. These are now the new rules of life in the country and of dealing with state bodies.

Then the people and organisations concerned will understand that from now on they must live by the laws of a banana republic. Stay if you like; leave if you like.

The second: everything I have described here will receive a specific official assessment from the law enforcement bodies. An inquiry will follow, and conclusions will be drawn.

Then the officials who forgot their duty for the sake of personal interests will give a formal account of their actions, and Israel will confirm its reputation as a democratic, civilised country.

A country one wants to live in.

The choice between the two is not mine but my readers'. Above all, those readers who have the authority to make final diagnoses and to cure the disease.