

SEPTEMBER 25, 1999

THE SYDNEY MORNING HERALD MAGAZINE

GOOD WEEKEND



The man they won't set free

In 1986 a young Jewish scientist revealed Israel's nuclear secrets to the world. He has been in jail ever since. Now, on the 13th anniversary of Mordechai Vanunu's capture by Mossad, David Leser tells why Israel can't forgive its most famous prisoner of conscience.



In 1986, Mordechai Vanunu spilled Israel's nuclear weapon secrets to the world as an act of conscience. Punishment was swift and severe: he was kidnapped by Mossad and sentenced to 18 years' jail. He's still inside. **David Leser** recalls the events that led to his downfall and why Israel won't forgive him.



The insider

HE SPENDS HIS DAYS IN A TWO-METRE by three-metre cell in Ashkelon's high-security prison 60 kilometres south of Tel Aviv. There is a small toilet and basin in an alcove, no window and only a few cracks in the door where he can vaguely discern the outlines of a corridor.

These are the boundaries of Mordechai Vanunu's life.

On Thursday, it will be 13 years since this 44-year-old former Israeli nuclear technician was abducted in Rome by the feared spy organisation Mossad, and brought back in a crate to Israel. For 11½ of these 13 years, he has been held in solitary confinement, the longest-known term of isolation imposed by a democracy in modern history.

For the first 2½ years of his term, a fluorescent light remained on for 24 hours a day while a video camera monitored his every movement. Vanunu never knew whether it was night or day. For the next nine years, he was denied any contact with other prisoners. He exercised alone. Mail was withheld from him for up to three months; his own letters were censored. His family could visit him only once a fortnight for half an hour, or once a month for an hour. They could speak to him through a metal grille and just about touch him with an outstretched finger.

Towards the end of 1996, a more sympathetic prison director allowed Vanunu and three of his brothers to talk and have coffee together in a visitors' room beside a courtyard. "It was the first time we had stood next to him in 10 years,"

his brother Meir told GOOD WEEKEND recently. "Emotionally, it was a very important moment." It was also the first time in 10 years Vanunu had seen grass.

Israeli authorities had argued for years that as a dissident Jew, his isolation was designed to protect him from other inmates. In March last year, after at least a dozen appeals to the district and supreme courts, the Israeli justice system decided that after nearly 4,200 days on his own, roughly one-quarter of his life, Vanunu could be released into the general population of the prison. He has another five years to serve.

THE STORY OF MORDECHAI VANUNU IS THE STORY of nuclear politics, international espionage and a man's titanic struggle with his own conscience.

It begins in Israel's Negev Desert in 1976 at the Dimona nuclear plant, where Vanunu was first employed as a trainee technician.

From there it spreads to Sydney, London, Rome and back to Israel again, sweeping up into its roller-coaster narrative an Australian Anglican priest, a South American huckster, the Maxwell and Murdoch presses, the Israeli political establishment, ASIO, MI6 and a frumpy, dyed-blond Mossad agent named "Cindy".

Back in 1976, though, no-one could have foretold that this quiet, thoughtful son of Orthodox Jews would emerge as one of the most controversial figures of the nuclear age, an object of vilification in his own country, but a symbol of anti-nuclear protest to many people around the world.

Vanunu was the second eldest of 11 children, born to Moroccan Jewish parents who emigrated to Israel in 1963, part of the mass migration of Jews pouring out of north Africa and the Arab League nations after the formation of the Jewish State in 1948.

Upon arrival in Israel, the Vanunu family was transferred to one of the many drab apartment blocks in the Negev Desert town of Beersheba. Within a few years, Shlomo Vanunu, Mordechai's father, had become a respected rabbi and had enrolled Mordechai in a religious boarding school.

In 1972, at the age of 18, Vanunu began his compulsory three-year service in the Israeli army, becoming first sergeant in a sapper unit stationed on the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. Then, in 1976, after briefly studying physics at the Tel Aviv University, he found employment at Dimona. To qualify, he was required to undergo a crash course in physics, chemistry, maths and English. He was also required to sign the Israeli Official Secrets Act. There was no mention that he would be part of a nuclear weapons program.

By August 1977, he was working as a supervisor on the night shift in the top-secret underground bunker where the vital components of Israel's nuclear bombs were being manufactured and assembled. It was known as Machon 2.

Enemy of the state: while Vanunu was being escorted to Jerusalem's District Court in December 1986, he managed to flash a message to the world media on his palm, confirming that he had been kidnapped.



Until this stage, Vanunu's political views had leant heavily towards the Far Right. But over the next few years, those views began to change radically. After completing bachelor of arts degrees in both geography and philosophy, he became a part-time lecturer in philosophy. He also enrolled in a master's degree and began studying the German atheist Nietzsche and the Danish Christian philosopher Kierkegaard.

In due course, Kierkegaard came to exert a powerful influence over Vanunu. It was the Dane who talked about individual courage and responsibility before God.

By the early 1980s, Vanunu had done a 360-degree turn on Palestinian nationalism. Israel's invasion of Lebanon and Vanunu's own exposure to Arab students on campus convinced him the Zionist dream had been built on a rock of Palestinian despair. He began to speak out for Palestinian rights and against Israeli militarism. He refused military service in Lebanon and started attending pro-Arab rallies.

His activities inevitably came to the attention of Shin Bet, Israel's ubiquitous internal security organisation and, by 1985, having found his position at Dimona untenable, he left. Before he did, though, he managed to avoid security

searches and took 60 photographs of Israel's nuclear bomb factory.

It was these two rolls of undeveloped film that he placed in the bottom of his backpack some months later as he set off for Australia via the ashrams of South-East Asia.

ON MAY 23, 1986, MORDECHAI VANUNU walked into the sandstone sanctum of St John's Anglican Church in Sydney's Kings Cross. The first person he met was Father John McKnight, now a systems manager with a computer company.

"He was just wandering around, staying in a backpackers' place on [nearby] Macleay Street," McKnight recalls. "He explained that he was from Israel. He told me he was interested in Christianity and had been studying Kierkegaard, so I told him David Smith [the catechist] was a keen student of Kierkegaard and was on duty outside. The rest is history."

Like many who have rallied to the Vanunu cause, Father David Smith is an unorthodox man. Currently rector of the Holy Trinity Anglican Church in Sydney's Dulwich Hill, he is also a martial arts expert and fierce advocate for social justice. His friendship began with Vanunu on that balmy autumn night, and continues to this day through years of correspondence. "[We

became] locked in passionate discussion about theories of meaning and existence," Smith says. "In Morde's broken English, we managed to discuss Nietzsche's concept of 'staring into the abyss' of your life and embracing your despair, and Kierkegaard's optimistic alternative – throwing yourself into the abyss and finding that the abyss is God and is able to support you."

Within three months of their meeting, Vanunu had made the momentous decision to reject Judaism and become baptised into the Christian church. It was a decision that would later account for much of the outrage directed at him by his fellow Israelis. Members of his family would also be appalled. "My family will hold a funeral for me," he told Smith. "They will consider me dead."

"At an academic level," says Smith, "he was also very self-consciously embracing Kierkegaard and rejecting Nietzsche. This is significant, for Kierkegaard was always on about taking 'risks' or 'leaps of faith', as he would call them."

As part of the church's commitment to social justice, Smith conducted regular discussion groups on how Christians should respond to issues like Third World poverty, racism and the nuclear arms race. Vanunu had finally found a group of people with whom he could share his

burden. It was at one of these discussions that he revealed his previous incarnation at Dimona.

Recalls Smith: "Vanunu said, 'I used to work in a nuclear factory. It was a secret factory.' 'Right,' I said, not knowing what else to say. Morde went on to tell me about some photos he had taken, and he suggested that he might put on a slide presentation for the group and show us exactly what this secret factory of his looked like. You meet a lot of unusual people in the Cross. I had learnt over time to nod my head agreeably to the most outrageous of stories."

Smith has always been convinced – as are many who are close to Vanunu – that Vanunu's decision to disclose the secrets of Dimona were inseparable from his decision to become a Christian. Smith explained this in a book on the Vanunu case, *Trial and Error*, by Tom Gilling and John McKnight: "When Mordechai became a Christian, I think he knew he would have to act on that. I remember discussing it with him, even when I had no idea of the gravity of the information he had, that perhaps he was in a privileged position to be able to do something in the area of peace which few of us could."

To do so, though, required help; unfortunately for Vanunu, it came in the form of Oscar Guerrero, a Colombian with an exaggerated sense of his own importance. Although Guerrero was working as a casual fence-painter at St John's, he'd managed to convince the unworldly Israeli during numerous conversations that he was a famous journalist with international contacts.

After one of their conversations, Vanunu decided to take his rolls of film to a one-hour photo shop in Kings Cross where, among hundreds of tourist happy snaps, the nuclear secrets of the Jewish State began tumbling out of the processing machine.

IT WILL BE TO THE ETERNAL REGRET OF THE Australian press that Oscar Guerrero was unable to interest newspapers here in what was to become one of the stories of the decade. Guerrero appeared too flaky, too unreliable for at least two papers to place their trust in him.

Instead, Guerrero turned to Rupert Murdoch's *Sunday Times* in London, where the story was assigned to Peter Hounam, one of its top investigative reporters. Hounam flew to Sydney at the beginning of September 1986 to meet Vanunu and, after spending more than two weeks studying the dozens of pictures of Israel's plutonium-processing operation, became convinced the story was authentic.

Hounam was also convinced – like McKnight and Smith – that Vanunu's actions were not motivated by money, but by the horror of his country having amassed such a nuclear arsenal, particularly given its refusal to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

At one point, Vanunu got cold feet. He wanted to burn the photos. He'd decided the ramifications for him and his family were too dire. At another point, he told Hounam he would tell the story for nothing – if the paper kept his name out of it. Hounam told him this was impossible – the paper needed an identifiable source.

On that basis, a deal was agreed to in which the newspaper committed itself to paying Vanunu \$75,000 in return for the photos and exclusive book rights. Vanunu wanted to give Guerrero \$25,000 and the church a similar amount. He was urged to use the rest to establish a new life for himself. As it turned out, no-one got a cent.

On September 11, Vanunu flew to London,

Within three months of meeting David Smith, Vanunu had made the decision to become a Christian. "My family will hold a funeral for me," he told Smith.



with every intention of returning to Sydney. What he didn't know was that Israeli intelligence was already on his tail. *The Sunday Times* had inadvertently tipped off the security services by flying another one of its reporters to Israel to speak to Vanunu's family and friends. Once that had happened, the famously efficient Mossad had placed Vanunu under surveillance in Australia a week prior to his departure.

Shortly after Vanunu left Sydney, ASIO, too, got in on the act. Vanunu had gone to Mascot airport in a minibus with Oscar Guerrero, John McKnight and a number of St John's parishioners. During the trip, Guerrero passed around the Dimona photos, boasting about the revelations that were to come. John McKnight has since written that one of the people in the vehicle had connections inside ASIO and was so concerned by the prospect of Israel's nuclear secrets being published that he decided to inform the organisation.

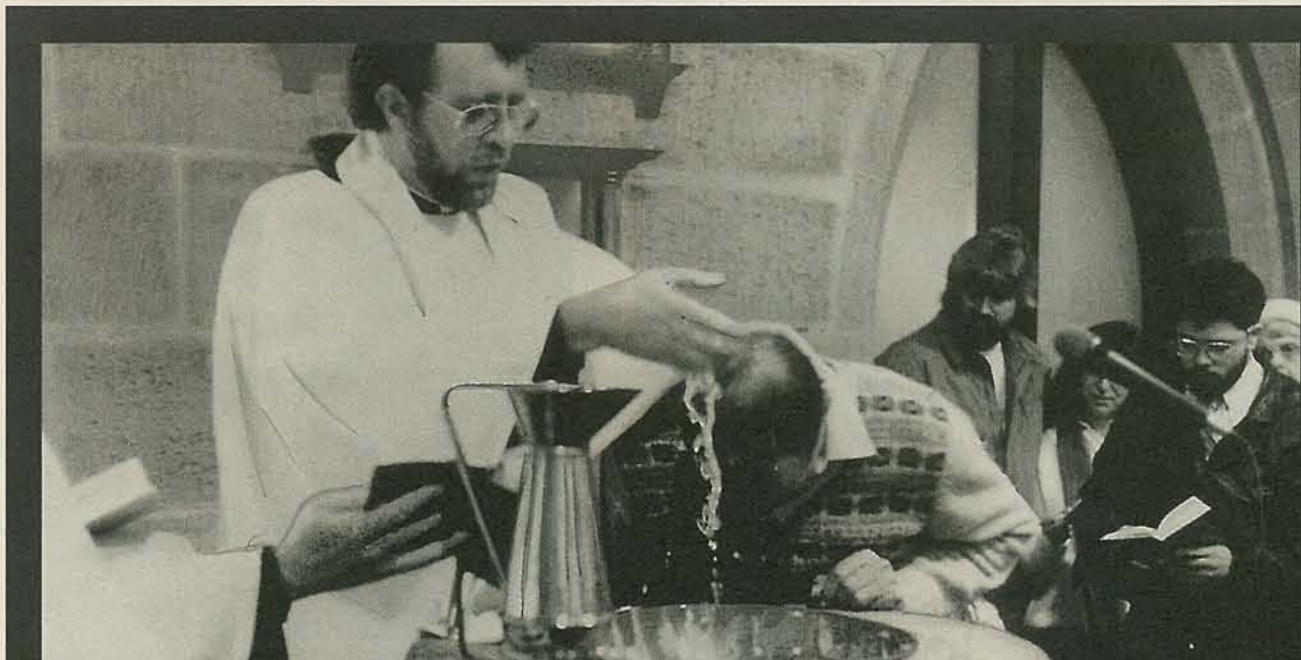
ASIO, it seems, lost no time in telling MI6. Peter Hounam later confirmed the existence of a telex sent by ASIO to its British counterparts, MI6, warning that Hounam was returning to London with Vanunu. (ASIO has consistently denied any involvement.) By the time Vanunu arrived in Britain, he was a marked man.

For the next few weeks, he was moved from one safe house to another under an assumed name, usually in the company of a *Sunday Times* reporter. As time passed, Vanunu became increasingly anxious about Mossad and the failure of the paper to publish his story. Oscar Guerrero became increasingly desperate to see his money. Convinced that he was being cut out of a deal, Guerrero went to Robert Maxwell's *Sunday Mirror* with a half-baked version of the story. Published on September 28, 1986, the story virtually denounced Vanunu as an impostor. But it did something even worse: it ran a photo of him.

Within hours of the story's publication, Vanunu decided he wanted to be released from *The Sunday Times*'s protection. He wanted to disappear into the crowd. And he wanted to do so preferably with the woman he'd met four days earlier.

"Cindy", an "American beautician", had caught his eye in Leicester Square. Somehow she managed to entice the normally reticent Vanunu to approach her and begin a conversation. They continued talking over coffee and then decided to meet again. Soon they were meeting daily.

By September 29, Vanunu was in a state of high agitation. He was convinced his version of the story was never going to be published and that he



Ministering to Mordechai: (clockwise from above) Father John McKnight with the newspaper headline that shook the world in October 1986; David Smith (on left) and the Rev Stephen Gray during an interview in the mid-'80s about their "celebrity" convert; Gray performing Vanunu's baptism.

Meir Vanunu (above) has never stopped campaigning for his brother's release; (right) an artist's impression of "Cindy", the Mossad agent whom Mordechai fell for.



Vanunu boarded a flight to Rome after his Mata Hari had bought two business-class tickets. She told him it would do him the world of good to get away.

was now a sitting target for Mossad. Cindy probably reinforced that belief. She arranged to meet him again, as did Peter Hounam.

In an interview with ABC-TV's *Four Corners*, Hounam recalled his last conversation with Vanunu. "I said, 'Well, you must realise it's quite possible that she's been planted. I mean, you know, can we arrange to meet?' And he said, 'Well, not tonight.' But I suggested that we should have dinner with my wife and Cindy the following evening [September 30]. He said, 'Fine, yeah, let's do that. Let's all go out together.'"

They never did. Instead, Vanunu boarded a flight to Rome the next day after his Mata Hari had bought two business-class tickets. Cindy told him her sister had an apartment in Rome. It would do him the world of good to get away.

About 10 hours before that flight, he made what would be his last telephone call as a free man; he phoned St John's Church to speak to

John McKnight. McKnight was not there. He then called Stephen Gray, the man who'd baptised him.

"He was caught between what he felt he must do according to his conscience and what that meant for his relationship with his country and his family," Gray was to later say. "He was a torn person."

Within 24 hours, Vanunu had been kidnapped from the Rome apartment. Mossad had its man.

MEIR VANUNU IS A 43-YEAR-OLD LAW graduate, two years younger than his brother Mordechai. He is a handsome man with sad, wandering-Jew eyes that hold you in their gaze for as long as you can bear it. If there is a world-weariness about him, it is because for most of the past 13 years he has doggedly led the international campaign to free his brother. It has nearly destroyed him. "It threw me off the course of my life," he says when we meet in a cafe in

Sydney. (Curiously, Meir lives and works in Potts Point, just around the corner from where his brother spent his last agonising months of spiritual conversion.) "I have been hijacked by it, and it hijacked the rest of my family, too. It has affected me significantly. I have known happiness with my [five-year-old] son, but all the time there are shadows."

For 9½ years, up until 1996, Israeli authorities had a warrant for Meir Vanunu's arrest. This followed a press conference he gave in 1987 in which he outlined the details of his brother's abduction. As the abduction is still a State secret in Israel, Meir was charged with espionage, a crime carrying 15 years' jail. The charges have still not been formally dropped.

"He told me in prison how he was abducted," Meir says. "As soon as he got to the flat in Rome, he was attacked by two secret service agents who beat, strangled and chained him. Then I think it was Cindy who injected him with drugs. When he woke up, he was chained to a bed in a small cell in a boat which brought him back to Israel. The trip took seven days. He was then put in a secret prison which is half the size of the cell today. As difficult as solitary confinement is, this was much, much harder. There were no other prisoners and no guards you could see."

On October 5, five days after Vanunu was abducted, *The Sunday Times* finally published the story and photographs of Israel's secret nuclear arsenal. Splashed across the front page, Peter Hounam's report revealed how Israel had managed to assemble as many as 200 nuclear weapons of varying sizes, including probably hydrogen and neutron bombs. This made Israel the world's sixth most powerful nuclear nation.

Israel refused to either confirm or deny the revelations and maintained silence regarding Vanunu's whereabouts. "There were rumours he was dead," says Meir. "There were no traces."

Only on November 9, almost six weeks after his disappearance and only after considerable international pressure, did the Israelis acknowledge he was in custody. Just under three weeks later, Vanunu was charged with high treason, aggravated espionage and the collection of secret information designed to impair the security of the State. The case was listed in Hebrew as "Attorney-General

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vs X". An appeal for an open trial was rejected.

On December 21, Vanunu was brought to the District Court in Jerusalem to hear a request by the State that his remand be extended to the end of his trial. This was the first time in 11 weeks that Vanunu had been seen. His appearance stunned the world because, as the police van pulled into a driveway thronged with journalists, Vanunu suddenly pressed his palm against the window of the van. On his hand read a message in English: "Vanunu M WAS HIJACKED IN ROME ITL, 30.9.86 21.00, Came to Rome BY BA FLY 504."

Here, finally, was proof of his abduction, one which the Israeli Government, to this day, denies any knowledge of. It has since been reported that the prime minister of the day, Shimon Peres, authorised the abduction and at the same time overruled his national unity government partner, Yitzhak Shamir. Shamir had wanted Vanunu assassinated while still in Australia.

On January 4, Vanunu began a 34-day hunger strike in protest at his treatment. Prison authorities had confiscated his books, newspapers and Walkman because of the hand message incident. They had also resorted to bringing Vanunu to court in a decoy vehicle, amid a convoy of wailing sirens and whitewashed windows. That way, no-one could see or hear him.

In August 1987, the trial of Mordechai Vanunu was held in camera. The prisoner was brought to the courthouse wearing a full-face motorcycle helmet, again to prevent him from speaking to anyone. At the end of March 1988, he was found guilty and sentenced to 18 years' imprisonment.

Only one line in the judges' 60-page verdict was deemed fit for public consumption: "We decided the defendant is guilty on all three counts."

I SRAEL IS A COUNTRY TEEMING WITH PARADOXES. It is a small, vulnerable nation with an omnipotent military machine; a haven for Jews who have yet to resolve what it means to be Jewish; a land of persecuted souls with a dreadful record of human rights abuses; a robust democracy, but an occupying power; a society that thrives on debate, but one that also averts its gaze.

As a Middle East correspondent in Israel at the time of the Vanunu affair, I once stood on a street corner in Jerusalem taking a straw poll on Israeli

attitudes toward Vanunu and the issue of nuclear weapons. Not one person supported Vanunu. Not one person saw a need – as Vanunu did – for a public discussion about the country's massive weapons program.

Nuclear weapons had been a taboo subject in Israel for 30 years. Why change now? As one rabbi explained: "Logically, nuclear arms should be an immediate problem, but it isn't, because we are engaged in conventional war and that is what is absorbing our physical and ethical energy. Besides, when you've already experienced a holocaust, nothing can be worse than that. There is no heat hotter than the ovens of Auschwitz."

During the first 10 years of Vanunu's incarceration, not one member of the Israeli Knesset (parliament) was to raise the subject of his kidnapping, the conditions of his imprisonment or the manner of his trial. His own testimony regarding the motivation for what he did remains a State secret.

Vanunu is still virtually a non-person within Israel but his stature abroad has grown enormously. In 1987, he was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by the London-based Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation. (He was nominated again in 1996.) The following year, 20 international scientists, including 12 Nobel Prize-winners, petitioned the Israeli courts to show leniency. That same year, 25 members of the European Parliament nominated Vanunu for the Andrei Sakharov Award.

In the early 1990s, the European Parliament passed three resolutions expressing its concern over what Amnesty International had described as the "cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment" of Vanunu's solitary confinement. The parliament pointed out that "those who have respect for human rights would not have been likely to treat a disclosure in a newspaper for motives of public interest as treason and espionage".

In 1996, it passed another resolution expressing its deep regret over Israel's failure to show mercy and asked for his early release. Two years later, the Australian Senate passed a unanimous motion welcoming the Israeli Government's decision to remove Vanunu from solitary confinement. It also called for an early release.

In March this year, 36 members of the US House of Representatives wrote to President Clinton urging his intercession. Clinton's response

– expressing concern not just about Vanunu's treatment, but Israel's nuclear program in general – was an unprecedented departure from the official State Department line that, firstly, the Vanunu case was an internal Israeli matter and, secondly, that he had not been mistreated.

The call for Vanunu's release on humanitarian grounds has also gained the support of former president Jimmy Carter, as well as the Federation of American Scientists, the Jewish Peace Fellowship and Daniel Elsberg, the former whistleblower who leaked the so-called Pentagon Papers to *The New York Times* in 1971 and, thus, helped end the Vietnam War. Elsberg describes Vanunu as "his brother".

In Britain, where Meir Vanunu launched the international campaign 12 years ago, support has come from, among others, actors Susannah York and Julie Christie, playwright Harold Pinter and the late Jewish violinist Yehudi Menuhin.

In a letter to *The Guardian* in 1994, Menuhin wrote: "For me, the case of Mordechai Vanunu does not rest on presumed guilt or innocence. He was certainly not guilty of murder or torture as are his judges and his captors, but they have betrayed all accepted standards of civilised conduct. I shall never quite accustom myself to the applied law which would place the one who tells the truth in chains and celebrates the lie."

TODAY, MORDECHAI VANUNU REMAINS IN HIS two-metre by three-metre cell surrounded by the books and thousands of letters sent to him by people around the world.

Two months ago, he appeared before the District Court in his home town of Beersheba with a petition asking the court to order prison authorities to transfer him to a wing of the prison where Palestinian political prisoners are held. He is still awaiting a ruling.

The Israeli newspaper *Yediot Ahronot* reported Vanunu's application and showed a photograph of him handcuffed to two prison officers. It was one of the few photos of Vanunu that had been released since his abduction and dramatic appearance at the Jerusalem District Court in 1986 and it revealed a decidedly more robust, less sallow prisoner than the one who'd been photographed last year.

From June 1991 to February 1995, Vanunu had

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appeared to enter a deep depression, cutting off contact with old friends, refusing to answer letters and hinting strongly that his isolation had caused permanent psychological damage. This photo seemed to offer hope that the relaxation of his prison conditions, combined with a new, strict exercise regimen and a tenacious spirit, might help him survive his banishment from the world.

In his 13 years of near-total isolation, even the Middle East has moved on. The Palestinian uprising which erupted in October 1987 has, for the most part, been stilled by the secret peace process begun in Norway.

Ancient enemies like PLO chairman Yasser Arafat and the former Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin have shaken hands on the White House lawn.

Arafat, Rabin and Shimon Peres, the father of the Israeli atomic bomb, have been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. The hostages in Beirut have been set free. Jordan and Israel have signed a peace treaty. Israel's internal intelligence organisation, Shin Bet, has been accused of perjury and the torture of Palestinian prisoners. "Cindy", the Mossad agent, has been exposed as Cheryl Bentov, the wife of an Israeli businessman. No warrant for her arrest on kidnapping charges has ever been issued by the British or Italian governments.

Meanwhile, scores of Israeli terrorists, murderers and rapists have been set free, as has Shimon Levinson, the former military adviser attached to the prime minister's office who was charged with spying for the KGB. He was released after 12 years.

Marcus Klingberg, former deputy director of Israel's biological and chemical weapons factory, was sentenced to 20 years in 1983 for spying for the Soviets. The octogenarian is now under house arrest. Nahum Manbar, convicted of selling material for mustard and nerve gas to Iran, was given a 16-year sentence, two years less than Vanunu.

Israel continues to cling to its policy of deliberate ambiguity on nuclear weapons, neither confirming nor denying that it has them, but insisting that it will not be the first country to "introduce" them to the Middle East.

Notwithstanding the many petitions made by Vanunu for his early release, Israeli authorities refuse to budge. Their rationale remains that Vanunu still possesses vital knowledge about

Dimona which, if made public, could harm the country's interests.

This fails to recognise three things. Firstly, Vanunu's revelations might have actually served Israel's interests by warning the Arab world of the foolhardiness of another war. Secondly, the revelations only elaborated on material which had already been published in such specialist publications as *Science* and *Aerospace Daily*. Thirdly, any knowledge that Vanunu had in 1986 would, in the opinion of a number of prominent nuclear physicists, be obsolete in 1999.

One of them, Professor Joseph Rotblat, abandoned his role in the US's secret wartime atomic project in Los Alamos when he realised its true intentions. The Nobel Peace Prize-winner told a conference in Tel Aviv in 1996 that Vanunu might have been misguided, but was no traitor to his country: "The threat of global destruction in a nuclear war makes it the duty of each of us to strive to prevent such a catastrophe. A prerequisite for this is that the general public is kept informed about what is going on. We are all entitled to know about any activity that may endanger our lives and threaten future generations."

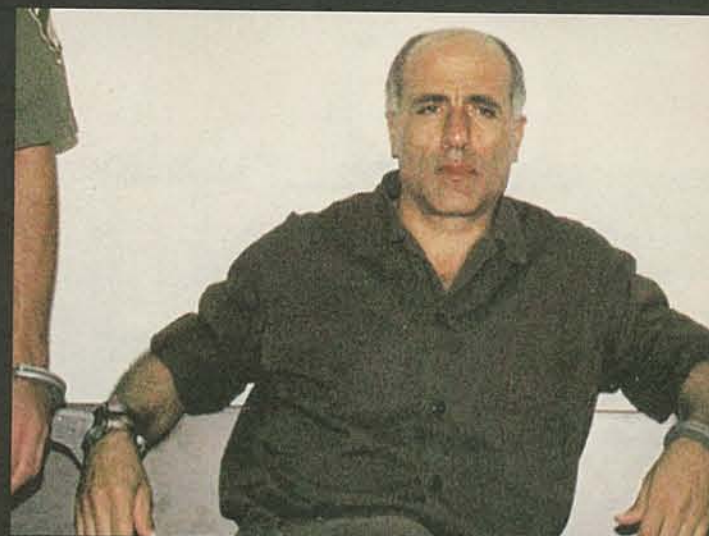
MORDECHAI VANUNU IS AS COMMITTED TO his principles today as he was 13 years ago. How future generations of Israelis will come to regard him, however, is anyone's guess.

Ostensibly, he has been in prison all this time because he committed an act of high treason. But perhaps there was a greater sin than this, one which may account, even at an unconscious level, for the severity of his punishment. In the eyes of his Jewish countrymen and women, Mordechai Vanunu did the unforgivable. He turned his back on his faith.

Even within his own family, there are sharp divisions. Three of his six brothers have supported him throughout his years of imprisonment, but his father, Shlomo, has been unwilling to see him since 1988. Instead, he prays for him every day.

Says Meir Vanunu: "Our mother [Mazel] has seen him all along, but this has absolutely broken her heart. She feels pain for him every day. This was her favourite son. He had the best memory for the Bible. The rabbis always gave him the most favourable reports."

Unorthodox prisoner: Vanunu in July, in court with a petition to be transferred to the Palestinian wing. He still awaits a ruling.



"Our mother has seen him all along but it has absolutely broken her heart. She feels pain for him every day. This was her favourite son."

Three of Vanunu's sisters have also declined to visit their brother. They are Orthodox Jews and although their love for him has not dimmed, they are forbidden by Jewish law to associate with a Christian. Since 1986, a dozen children have been added to the Vanunu clan. With one exception, Mordechai has not met any of them.

Life, however, still beckons. Last year, a retired couple from St Paul, Minnesota, were given legal permission to adopt Vanunu as their son. Vanunu plans to live with them in America when he is released.

And three months ago he was allowed to hold the newborn son of another brother, Asher. Meir Vanunu says that it made Mordechai feel very good just to touch another person.

"It was the most human thing that has happened to him in 13 years," he says. ■

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