

Hillel Halkin

# A Strange Death

*The Toby Press*

## *Chapter one*

**S**ometimes, tired of being asked how we came to Zichron, I gave as the reasons a brown dog, a full moon, and two bottles of local white wine. If it wasn't the whole truth, you couldn't say it was none of it.

We arrived in Israel, Marcia and I, in 1970, intending to settle in Jerusalem. Or rather, outside of Jerusalem, on an acre of stony land, with a view of old, terraced hills. We had both lived in Jerusalem before, and if nothing else it was a city that inspired longing.

But that spring in Jerusalem it seemed that whoever had longed for the place had returned to it all at once and was looking for somewhere to live. The doors of the real estate offices reopened behind you before they had time to shut; the boom gripping the city since the 1967 war was at its height. One day we answered an ad for a country villa that led to a converted chicken coop with a view of the road to Tel Aviv. Columns of buyers filed through it as though it were the last shelter on earth. The asking price was a transcendent sum, and it was clear that it would be seen, raised, and called before the day was done. We called for time-out.

And so we set out to visit friends in Haifa, driving down to the coastal plain and heading north. On our left was the smog of Tel Aviv and unseen beyond it the sea, to which the smudge of the mountains of

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Samaria ran parallel on our right. Citrus trees rose and fell in dark swells against the red clay of earth and tiled roofs. Rows of wicked cypresses hedged them around, lit by the flames of runaway bougainvilleas.

Beyond the city of Hadera sand dunes set in, blown by the sea winds from the old Roman port of Caesaria. The hills to the east loomed closer now, mountain and sea on a collision course. Soon, as though struggling to its feet, a first spur of the Carmel rose ahead of us in a steep talus.

The road crossed some railroad tracks, wriggled around the base of a limestone cliff, and ran along stands of windmill-leaved banana trees, their fruit encased in plastic bags of the same Mediterranean blue that flashed briefly out toward the horizon.

We pulled into a filling station at the foot of a hill that was said by a sign to be thirty-five kilometers from Haifa and three from Zichron Ya'akov. This was a town neither of us had been in. I didn't know many things about it. One was that it was one of the first Jewish farming colonies established in modern Palestine toward the end of the nineteenth century; another that Ya'akov was the Hebrew name of Baron James de Rothschild, in whose honor the town was named. Somewhere I had heard or read of a Jewish spy ring that had operated in it during World War I. And wine was made there, as declared by the labels on the bottles of Carmel-Mizrachi, the country's largest vintner.

A salt breeze blew through the window of the car. After the austere air of Jerusalem, it felt like a damp caress. I paid for the gas and suggested driving up the hill to Zichron. Perhaps we might find a cold drink there.

The sea came into view at the first hairpin turn of the climb. So did a mirrorwork of fishponds that had been hidden by the tree line. Thin embankments sliced them into panels that glittered in the setting sun. Then we were around the last bend, with a view up the coast to the old Crusader fortress at Atlit. We passed a picnic grounds, entered the streets of the town, and parked in a public square with a small park.

Perhaps nothing is ever remembered as we first encountered it, since memory is a palimpsest on which time erases and we rewrite the same story many times. So, if I recall crossing the street to the synagogue at the square's far end – that plain stone building with its Hebrew-numeraled clock face, built by the French architects of James

de Rothschild's son Edmond to stand in the center of town with the sober authority of a parish church – and seeing old Tishbi ride by on his donkey, the inseparable four legs on which he sat, a blue-capped satyr, while it chauffeured him anonymously about town (for when I asked him years later what he called it, he simply grinned with the three yellow teeth that were stuck like the prongs of a pitchfork in his mouth and said, “Donkey”), or Carmeli the druggist, who liked to close early, walking smartly up the block in his tan blazer, in one hand a panama hat and in the other the leash of his white poodle whose manicured toenails clicked against the pavement like high heels, this does not mean that I saw either of them that day. There were to be enough other days when I did – long summer afternoons cooling indolently into evening as the town prepared to lock up and go home – to include them in this story, along with the basketed shoppers waiting for the bus to take them back to the government projects on the outskirts of town, the teenagers lined up by the public telephone at the post office to make their assignations for the night, the jungle-hatted farmers riding their bucking tractors back from the vineyards and fields, and the children crowding the felafel stand next to Shlomo Toker's appliance store before going home to tell their mothers they weren't hungry and could they please go out for one last game of hide-and-seek; or else, with another rub of the slate, Asheri, the little cock's-crow of a greengrocer, dragging crates of vegetables into his store in which he wisely thumped the chests of melons in seven languages, or, burly as a wine barrel, Mordche, the last Mohican of the wagon drivers, swapping tall tales and the black-market rates of leading currencies with his cronies while his mules dreamed in the courtyard of the legendary Graf Hotel, wherein even the most fastidious of European travelers, as promised by Baedeker's *Guide To Palestine and The Middle East*, could find “tolerable accommodations for the night” if reminded to look for them by the sound of the sun splashing into the sea in the year nineteen-hundred-and-seven.

Had he paused at the entrance to the hotel, the traveler could have seen in all directions to the ends of “the new Jewish colony of Jacob's Memory,” at the almost precise midpoint of which he would have stood. Sixty-three years later this was no longer the case, although the intersection that we had reached of Hameyasdim and Hanadiv Streets, Founders

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Street and the Street of the Benefactor, as the philanthropic Edmond was called by the colonists, still formed the town's commercial hub. It was a hub that had seen better days, though, for the center of Zichron was more *éclatant* then, as befitted a little outpost of Frenchdom in the Levant: not only the newly opened hotel (whose elegant façade with its twin flagpoles for the Ottoman crescent and the Star-of-David, and its fancily-lettered Maspero Cigar sign, was now shared by a shabby barbershop and a defunct dry cleaner's, while the rear of the premises, where Miriam Graf had served meals in the white-lined dining room and her husband Alter had shown silent movies to the accompaniment of Munjak the fiddler, was occupied by the cottage chocolate industry of Mr. Emmanuel Turskanov of Riga, son of a former bonbon czar of the Baltic), but also the arabesqued fences around the front yards of the houses that were torn down to make way for the sidewalks installed after World War I; the gas lamplights in their glass hexagons, which – if he lingered a while longer in the doorway – the traveler might see lit, one by one, like the candles on a birthday cake; and the ornamental pool in the middle of the intersection, drained after a drunken Arab horseman sailed into it one night and was found nose-down among the water lilies in the morning. There were times when I saw these vanished splendors too, or imagined that I did, so lost in some yarn of Moshe Shatzman's or Yanko Epstein's that had Edmond de Rothschild himself driven by with a clatter of coach wheels on one of his grand *tours d'inspection* to the brassy strains of "Carry To Zion Pennant and Banner" played by the town band from the proscenium in the park, I would not have pinched myself. But that was later. Now, I saw none of this – saw only a perpendicular pair of shopping streets whose low, red-roofed buildings looked badly in need of a facelift. A swirl of diesel fuel, tobacco smoke, and frying mashed chickpeas settled into the littered curbs by the side of old newspapers, fallen candy wrappers, discarded good-byes, and the fatigued cries of homeward-wheeled infants: the detritus of an Israeli town at 6:45 P.M. of a fading June day.

Marcia and I crossed Founders Street and continued along the Street of the Benefactor, which ran beneath leafy pipal trees down the other side of the hill: past Aminadav's grocery; past the kiosk of the potato-nosed Parsee; past the gift shop of Avraham Baer and the liquor

store of his brother Yitzhak, known as Gift Bear and Wine Bear; past Miriam's wool store, emptying of its gossip of housewives; past Yafia Cohen's open doorway, in which, ruddy as a sailor and nearly as bald as a monk, sat Yafia Cohen on the observation deck of her folding chair, a white lace kerchief around her neck to shield the sunburn on her widowed breasts that peered wistfully out from the crevice of her calico dress; past Carmeli's drugstore, where Carmeli was locking up (funny: hadn't I just seen him by the synagogue?) while his poodle scratched at the stairs leading down to the street; across Jabotinsky Street under the blank stares of the crazy tinker and his wife taking the evening air beside their jars of cabbage and pickles set out to sour in the sun on the stoop of their one-room hovel that smelled like a pestilence; past Motl Sokolov, putting his donkeys to bed for the night; past Benedik's hardware store, by which Meir Benedik, an army fatigue cap riding high on his honeyed haystack of hair, paused to rest with a fifty-kilo sack of cement outside the barred window through which Yosef Davidesco was shot to death by the Stern Gang in 1946; past the ruined house hit by an Iraqi bomb in the '48 war; past Yigal Neiderman drinking Turkish coffee at a table in his yard with his Bedouin riding buddies. Further down the hill, where the Street of the Benefactor swung sharply to the right and disappeared on its way out of town, rose the tall brick chimney of the winery.

We crossed to the opposite sidewalk and turned left into Wine Street, past Ora and Micha Rosenzweig's house, in front of which Ora stopped trimming her *lontana* bushes to glance up from the very spot she had stood in when the shots rang out and Davidesco's killers turned and ran to their getaway car, passing so close that she could have touched them; past Shmuel and Sonia Bloch's house, where Sonia, who hadn't spoken to Ora since their fateful quarrel over a lost library book, was picking snap beans in her garden; past Tsvi Zuckerman, who was not on speaking terms with the Rosenzweigs either; past Akiva Weissfish tinkering with his lawn mower; past the Lundins' house; past the limit of the town itself, for before us was only a copse of pine trees, and beyond it, partially glimpsed through their branches, a premonition of unbounded space.

At the bottom of the pine copse, a dirt road branched off to the left. We followed it along a contour of the hillside, beneath which, half-screened by olive trees that gave way to a hedge of vine-laced acacias,

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the ground fell away in vineyards and orchards. Although the drop to the valley below us was only a few hundred feet, its sharp tilt made one feel an almost vertiginous height, so that, coming to a clearing in the hedge, we stopped to marvel at the view. We were looking east into the oncoming night, which even on the longest of summer days descended quickly in this place, or rather, seemed to thicken out of the air like a purplish-gray batter into which the last light had been poured.

Already the fields in the valley, down which ran a ribbon of road, were dull in the twilight; beyond them, ridge after ridge, the Carmel rose to a massif. On our right, a promontory of the town, a last human headland, dipped down to meet the valley; small houses and stone walls huddled beneath the winery, whose chimney rose like the spire of a cathedral. Beyond the furthest wall, a horse did figure-eights in a field, trying to clear a rope from a hind leg; with an awkward leap it was free and ran whinnying toward the field's end until brought short by its tether. The blossoms of the acacias stung the air with a dusty tartness. Goat bells tinkled. We listened, reluctant to tear ourselves away until the last trickle of light had been stirred into the stiffening night.

"Matsati!"

A dog with a hobbyhorse head and short, stubby legs was barking at us from a driveway. The voice called in crisp English:

"Matsati! What the devil are you making that racket for?"

A handsome, white-bearded man, his hand gripping a pipe bowl, appeared at the top of the driveway.

We apologized for the disturbance.

The pipe gestured generously out toward the view, as if pleased to share it. "Quite all right. 'Tsati, when will you learn this is a public thoroughfare? I say, you must be Amurricans."

He gave the vowel a slurred sound, tweaking the colonials.

"And you're British."

"Good lord, no. South African, my boy, a bloody Boer. Matsati, you brute, would you kindly stop slobbering over... but you haven't told me your name, dear. Mah-syah? Lovely. Rather Roman. Mine's Izzy. Israel Traub for short. You'll have to excuse my dog's manners; he's a native of the Middle East. Well, do come and join us for a sundowner. My wife and I were just sitting down to one."

We accepted the invitation. A drink was what we had driven up the hill for, and if we made it a quick one we could still get to Haifa for dinner. The hobbyhorse dog played wickets with our legs while we followed our host to a raspberry-colored cottage on a lawn. "Oh!" Marcia exclaimed. She had stopped by a miniature pond surrounded by a dwarf forest of nasturtiums and was staring at two stone figures on its shores: one a coiled cat, regarding the water with lidless eyes, and the other a bathing woman hugging her breasts. A strong, squat sense of kinship extended between them.

"Do you like them?" Izzy Traub asked. "Rhoda made them. Cat's a cheeky fellow. Matsati, haven't you been fed yet? Rho! Rho-o-ow! Don't tell me she's still in the shower."

Matsati stood nosing an empty bowl. A bell jingled as the cottage door opened and Rhoda Traub emerged bearing a tray with two glasses. A short, slender woman in a silvery caftan, she arched quizzical eyes at her husband.

"We've got guests," Izzy said. "Tsati treed them. Hand them those drinks and I'll fix us two more. D'you know he didn't come home last night until the wee hours? Quite the dog around town."

While the rake wolfed his supper, the four of us sipped our drinks on the terrace. "Local poison," Izzy Traub said. "Whisky and a spot of sweet *ver*-mouth from the winery over there." He pointed in the direction of the brick chimney, which was hidden by a huge carob tree. "I believe you chaps call it a manhattan. Wonderful place, New York."

"Cheers," Rhoda said. It was easy to like the Traubs. They had come to Israel, they told us, as volunteers to fight in Israel's 1948 war of independence. South Africa, they had decided, was finished, a country of white masters and black slaves. Yet there remained something brightly pukka in their manner that kept one half-listening above the crackle of melting ice for the click of a croquet ball or the rustle of a servant girl's dress. After the war they had tried farming and had lived for several years in Jerusalem.

"What brought you to Zichron?" Marcia asked.

"We didn't plan it that way," laughed Rhoda, as if recalling a clever joke played on her. "It was because of Edmond de Rothschild. Back in the fifties, the family in France decided to have him exhumed and



reburied here with all the honors. I suppose they wanted him out of the way. The architect who designed the mausoleum was a friend and asked me to do some sculpture for the grounds. We came for a fortnight and never left. Zichron was a marvelous place in those days, wasn't it, Izzy?"

"Marvelous. Little old grannies in white kerchiefs. Do you remember, Rho, how the cows came home from pasture? Each knew its own house. They'd peel off when they got there as if dancing a reel."

Rhoda Traub swatted a mosquito. "That's all gone now. No one's kept a cow in years. The farmers grow their grapes and buy their milk in plastic bags. The old barns are collapsing. Beautiful stone things and no one gives a hoot." She had a habit when talking about something of cocking her head and squinting fretfully, as if wondering how to model it in clay.

"All these natives care about is the linings of their pockets," Izzy Traub grumbled into his pipe.

Rhoda murmured assent. "Still, the place isn't totally ruined. It has atmosphere, say what you like. And such quiet." As she paused to let us hear it, a donkey brayed with the panicky sound of someone being mugged. "That's one of Motl Sokolov's," she said. "People are thick around here, but they aren't bad sorts. You see them as part of the landscape. You might as well get cheesed off at an olive tree."

"They're peasants," Izzy said. "Stubborn, greedy, pigheaded Jewish peasants. And the stories they tell! Beats *The Arabian Nights*. About as much truth in them, too. Why, *hel-lo*, you've finished your drink. Here, I'll fill you up again."

He captured my glass and went off to replenish it. Marcia reminded me of dinner in Haifa.

"Nonsense," Rhoda Traub said. "You'll eat with us. I'll throw something together in a jiffy."

The day was drifting off course and it didn't seem to matter. Overhead a golden button, Vega or Arcturus, slipped through the satin vest of the sky. Rhoda set the table with a checkered cloth on which she laid silver and crockery; Marcia went to the cottage to telephone Haifa; Izzy produced a bottle of chilled winery hock; and we sat down to eat. The conversation flowed easily, tacking back and forth like the bats in the mothy night. Yet I was having trouble following its progress; it was easier

to concentrate on the crickets tuning their bows; and whole sections of it faded in and out like a program on a car radio when you're driving through a series of tunnels.

"...The grape harvest starts in August," Rhoda Traub was saying. "And on the street leading down to the winery is a bakery. On mornings when there's an east wind, you wake up smelling fresh bread and wine. It's like a whiff of Paradise..."

"...Another glass?" Izzy Traub asked. "No? Why did I open a new bottle? Come on, lad, don't let down the home side. Here, I'll fill you right up..."

Over freshly baked scones, Rhoda told us she had driven a lorry in the South African army during World War II. Izzy served in Egypt; he saw the Pyramids and missed El Alamein. They met after being demobbed, in a little fishing village where both had gone to sketch and Izzy to flee a career in barristry.

"I love the sea," Rhoda said. "And the mountains. Where else in this country do you have them together like this?"

Someone was snoring.

At first I thought it was me, groggy from the wine. Yet when I sat up with a start, the sound continued, although apart from Marcia, who was clutching my arm, no one seemed to have noticed. Rhoda Traub had risen to clear the table, Izzy was relighting his pipe, and Matsati lay ears down on the lawn, jaws working like a nutcracker at the splintered remains of a bone.

*Khhhhhhh-hhhhhhhhaaaaa.*

Marcia's fingers dug into me.

"What's that?"

Izzy looked up, puzzled, from his pipe.

"That sound."

He chuckled.

"Oh, don't mind him, dear. That's old Tito."

"Who?"

"*Tyto Alba*. Our barn owl. It's his adenoids."

"Coffee?" Rhoda Traub asked, returning from the kitchen.

"Look!" Marcia said.

A round, orange, monstrously inflated moon had risen so swiftly

behind the winery that none of us had seen it come up. Out of breath, it hung there, puffing its gouty cheeks. A bat flitted across it. The wheezing of the barn owl, coming now from here and now from there, made it seem that the earth had fallen asleep and was breathing like a drunk in a ditch.

There was magic in the air. Still, Marcia surprised me when she asked the Traubs if they knew of a house for sale. She had never expressed an interest in small-town life.

“Can’t say that I do,” Izzy Traub replied. “There is a piece of land, though.”

“Where?”

“Right next door.” He aimed his pipe at the huge carob tree. “Care to see it?”

He led us beneath the tree and onto a sloping field. A flood of light from the spongy moon had washed the stars from the sky. In their place, the vista now twinkled with the constellations of near and distant villages.

“On a clear day you can see Mount Tabor in the Galilee,” Izzy said. The lights of Haifa shone like a far galaxy.

“Whose land is it?”

“Ephraim Ashkenazi’s. A local farmer. He stopped me in the street the other day to tell me I could have first crack at it. So it’s destiny you two turned up here tonight – unless it’s just coincidence.”

Izzy’s tone made it clear that he had little use for coincidence.

“If you give me his number,” I said, “I’ll call him right now.”

“By God, let’s drink a brandy to that,” said Izzy Traub.

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Ephraim Ashkenazi was a short, smiling farmer with muscular arms and a white jungle hat to shield him from the sun, which in mid-morning whipped brutally down. Each of us flanked by a second – I by Izzy Traub, Ashkenazi by a thin-lipped, liver-spotted man introduced as Gedalia Kruppik, who sat without removing from his mouth the cigarettes that burned down in them like fuses – we chatted in the shade of the Traubs’ carob tree about the weather and the grape crop while I watched a lizard doing push-ups on a rock. Ashkenazi was selling a dunam, a quarter of an acre. This comprised the bottom half of a property that ran downhill from the house on Founders Street in which he had been born and

his deaf old brother still lived. But although it was selling for a fraction of what it would have cost near Jerusalem, there wasn't enough of it for the vegetable garden, the fruit trees, the chickens, the goats that Marcia and I dreamed of having.

"It's too small," I said, looking at the dunam, which began below three rows of citrus trees that Ashkenazi was keeping for himself.

"Small?" Beads of sweat glistened on his forehead. "A dunam is a legal building plot. Ask Gedalia."

"We want more land."

His glance wandered out toward the skullcap of Mount Tabor on the horizon. "Look, I'm a farmer," he said. "You don't have to tell me about land. It hurts to sell even this much. But a dunam is plenty. You'll have your hands full just weeding it."

"I like weeds."

"So do snakes."

Gedalia Kruppik flicked away the last half-inch of his cigarette and eyed me with interest. "Ezra Goldstein has two dunam next to this," he said.

"I didn't know Ezra was selling," Izzy remarked.

"He will," Kruppik said. He had the eyes of a small-town sheriff and a head like a large, speckled egg.

I turned to Ashkenazi. "It's a deal if you throw in the citrus trees."

"You can plant your own," he said.

"I want these."

"The bottom row."

"The bottom two."

"Congratulations," Kruppik said, stepping between us. "I get my two percent when you get title."

I was too bewildered to ask what two percent that was. Ephraim Ashkenazi had a dazed look. We exchanged addresses like men whose cars have met in an accident and Gedalia Kruppik led him off the field along a footpath running toward Wine Street.

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Ezra Goldstein was a tree lover too.

When the two dunams he sold us were surveyed, the border

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between us ran through the trunks of two plum trees. We offered to pay extra to move it.

Goldstein refused. The plum trees had always been his. He would pay us to move the border the other way.

We said no. If he felt that strongly about it, the border could stay where it was. I didn't doubt the trees were old. Their branches were shaggy and split by the weight of the yellow fruit that soon would ripen on them. But they didn't look cared for; how attached to them could he be? Just to reach them meant scrambling down a steep drop at the rear of his yard, no mean task for a man in his sixties who walked with a cane and carried his belly like a feed sack. Unlike most of the old-timers in town, he had never been much of a farmer. He had left Zichron as a young man to seek his fortune in Paris, where he had worked for twenty years as an upholsterer in the *quartier juif*, bringing back a wife – a would-be opera singer, it was said – who went mad and was kept, screeching arias of frustration, under lock and key. “*Vous parlez français alors?*” he had asked with a watery wink while we negotiated the sale of his land, as though sharing a secret against Kruppik. “*C'est une langue de la plus grande importance pour un jeune homme d'esprit.*” It was rumored that he had acquired in the French capital the abhorrent vice of eating snails, which he gathered every autumn when the first rains released them from their summer sleep and consumed by himself like a miser counting his coins.

One day in the snail season, we drove up from Jerusalem to meet our architect on the land. It was time to determinate the exact location of our house. Should it be toward the bottom of the property, permitting a shorter driveway, or further up, where the ground leveled off? The more it did, however, the more the view of the valley disappeared, leaving only the foreshortened hills; by the time you got to the plum trees... the plum trees! All that was left of them were two stumps. They had been mangled with an ax, their hacked branches flung on the ground like clothing after an orgy. Goldstein! I ran to his house. He was out. That evening I got him on the phone.

“Goldstein!”

“Heh?”

“How could you have done it?”

“You! You made me.” His voice was aggrieved, the injured party’s. “They were my trees. I watered them as a boy. I offered to pay you for them.”

“For God’s sake,” I said. It was as if the true mother in the story of Solomon had torn her baby limb from limb and accused the false mother of murder. “There was enough fruit for us both.”

“We’d have fought over it. I wanted us to be good neighbors.”

If he did, it was discouraging to think that one of us was a madman. The next time I saw him in town, his belly pendulous above the belt supporting it like a truss, I crossed to the other side of the street. By the time I could bring myself to speak to him again, we were already living in our house.