

## Matter of the Heart

EVERY GERMAN child knows the story of the Captain of Koepenick.

The scene is 1908 Germany, with the Second Reich at the peak of its power, ruled by a Kaiser who is almost always decked out in a splendid military uniform.

A shoemaker named Wilhelm Voigt is released from prison, after doing time for fraud. He needs a passport to get a job, but felons cannot obtain a passport.

The shoemaker goes to a masquerade shop and puts on the uniform of an army captain. He commandeers a squad of soldiers that happens to be passing in the street. They do notice some irregularities in his outfit but dare not disobey an officer.

The "captain" marches the soldiers to the little town of Koepenick, a suburb of Berlin, arrests the mayor and confiscates the safe, which contains blank passports. Later the police have no great difficulty making out who committed the outrage, and it is not long before he is arrested.

When an adjutant announces the news to the Kaiser, the court holds its breath. After a tense moment or two, His Majesty bursts out laughing. All of Germany laughs with him, along with the rest of Europe.

The "Hauptmann von Koepenick" became a legend, because his adventure threw into relief the very essence of the regime: in the militarist Germany of the time, just before World War I, military rank meant unquestioned authority.

PERHAPS IT is true that every country has an episode of this kind, highlighting with one stroke the main foibles of its regime. In Israel it was – until this week – the affair of the "Ramat Gan Light Bulb".

In March 1982 the Economy Minister Yaacov Meridor, a leading member of the Likud, announced that a scientist by the name of Danny Berman had come up with an invention that would cause a revolution throughout the world. By a simple chemical process he was able to produce energy sufficient to light all of Ramat Gan with one single light bulb. Ramat Gan is a sister town of Tel Aviv, and almost as big.

Yaacov Meridor (no relation of the current minister Dan Meridor) was not just anybody. He had been the commander of the Irgun before the arrival of Menachem Begin, and later had set up major economic enterprises in Africa. He was the No. 2 Likud leader and it was no secret that Begin considered him his heir and successor.

Before Meridor's announcement, a senior reporter of my news magazine, Haolam Hazeh, came to me and told me breathlessly about the wondrous invention. I responded with one word: Nonsense. My years as an investigative magazine editor had honed my nose for detecting phony stories. But the whole country was ecstatic.

In the following days, the revolutionary invention was exposed as a simple fraud. Berman, the genius who

posed as a former Air Force officer, was exposed as an impostor with a criminal record. Meridor lost his political future. But a small band of True Believers, including my senior reporter, continued to swear that Berman was indeed a misunderstood genius.

How could a completely nonsensical story, without any foundation at all, capture a whole country and elicit general acceptance, at least at the beginning? Very simple: it expressed one of the deeply-held beliefs of the Israeli public - that Jews are the most intelligent people in the world.

That, by the way, is a conviction held both by many Jews and by anti-Semites. The infamous tract "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion", which discloses a Jewish conspiracy to take over the world, relies on this belief.

There are many theories which profess to explain the alleged superiority of the "Jewish Brain". One asserts that in the thousands of years of persecution, the Jews were compelled to develop their brainpower just in order to survive. Another theory goes like this: in medieval Catholic Europe, the most intelligent men became priests or monks whose vocational celibacy prevented the transmission of their genes to offspring, while it was the habit in the Jewish communities for rich parents to marry their daughters to the most outstanding young scholars.

THIS WEEK, the Ramat Gan Light Bulb was trumped by an even more magnificent invention: the Heart Sticker.

The economic supplement of Haaretz published a sensational scoop: a virtually unknown Israeli company had sold a third of its shares to a Taiwan-British corporation for 370 million dollars, raising its own value to a billion. All this owing to a revolutionary invention: a small sticker that, when put on the breast, can foretell a heart attack a crucial half hour before it actually happens. The sticker sends out warnings by cellular phone and satellite, thus introducing the possibility of saving countless lives.

That evening, one of the chiefs of the happy firm appeared on TV and disclosed that the wonder-sticker could do much more: for example, it could measure the amount of sugar in the blood without invading the body.

My nose immediately began to twitch.

And indeed, a day later the media started to investigate the matter, revealing one curious fact after another. Nobody had actually seen the wonder sticker. No patent had been registered. No cardiologist or other expert had examined it. No scientific paper had mentioned it. And, it seems, no scientific experiment had been conducted.

The Taiwan-British company had sent no representative to Israel to examine the invention for which it had allegedly paid a huge sum. The negotiations had been

conducted entirely by email, without any personal contact. The lawyers involved refused to show the signed agreement.

When reporters contacted the foreign company, they denied any knowledge of the matter. It appeared that the inventor had registered a computer domain with a similar name and thus actually sold the shares to himself.

At this stage, the house of cards started to fall apart. It was revealed that the inventor had twice done time in prison for fraud. But his partners still insisted that the matter was serious and that within days, if not hours, the genius of the invention would be revealed to all, and the critics would be compelled to eat their hats.

The hats remained uneaten, and the partners deserted the ship one after the other.

WHAT TRANSFORMED the affair from an amusing "sting" operation into a matter of national importance was the readiness of the whole country, for a whole day, to accept the story as another proof of Jewish genius.

No less typical was the identity of its heroes. No. 1 was the inventor himself, who continues to protest that this time, this of all times, he is not an impostor. No. 2 was his partner, the businessman, who was or was not an accomplice to the fraud. But the interesting characters are the other two main protagonists.

No. 3 has been for many years the closest friend of Binyamin Netanyahu, and especially of his wife, Sarah (known to everybody by the childish diminutive Sara'le). At the height of the scandal he resigned his job as CEO, after failing to obtain a copy of the famous contract. If it is assumed that this friend of Netanyahu's is indeed innocent, his level of intelligence must be subject to grave doubts. However, it may not be intelligence that the Netanyahu family looks for in close friends.

That is even more true for No. 4: Haggai Hadas. The exact nature of his involvement is not entirely clear. At the beginning, he vigorously defended the invention and seemed to be involved from head to foot, but when the thing blew up he desperately tried to distance himself from it.

Why is this any more important than the usual gossip? Because Haggai Hadas, apart from enjoying Netanyahu's confidence and being, reportedly, a personal friend of his wife, has served in the past as chief of the operations department of the Mossad, the third most important post in the spy agency. He could by now have been the Mossad chief, if the incumbent had not actively prevented everybody else from coming even close.

Some weeks ago, Netanyahu appointed Hadas to one of the most sensitive positions in the security establishment: to coordinate all the efforts to free the "kidnapped" soldier Gilad Shalit.

If we do not want to assume that this man, a confidante of the Prime Minister and a former senior officer of the Mossad, who has been responsible for life-and-death

decisions, was an accomplice to a vile fraud, there is no escape from the conclusion that his judgment is grievously impaired and that he fell into a trap that any person with common sense could have spotted a mile off.

How can such a person possibly be entrusted with such a sensitive task as the negotiation for a prisoner exchange with Hamas, in which sophisticated Egyptian mediators are involved?

And what does this say about the judgment of Netanyahu, who appointed him to this task, especially assuming that his wife had demanded it?

THIS WEEK also marked a milestone: the end of the first 100 days of Netanyahu's second term as Prime Minister.

The Kadima people have invented a catchy slogan: "100 days, 0 achievements".

To start with, Netanyahu appointed a bloated government in which a third of all Knesset members serve as ministers or deputy ministers, many of them without any apparent duties. Two of the three most important ministries were allotted to totally unsuited persons: the Treasury to an economic toddler and the Foreign Office to a racist who is openly shunned by many of the world's most prominent leaders.

Then there came a series of laws and measures that were announced with great fanfare, only to be dropped very quietly. The latest example: the levying of VAT on fruits and vegetables, which was abandoned at the last moment.

But the epitome of inefficiency was the inability to put together the Prime Minister's staff. The Advisor for National Security, Uzi Arad, is not interested in peace with either the Palestinians or the Syrians, and wants to deal only with the Iranian issue. (This week President Barack Obama issued a public and unequivocal prohibition on any Israeli military attack on Iran.) The Chief of Cabinet, the Director General of the Prime Minister's office, the Political Advisor and other members of the staff detest each other and do not make any effort to hide it. The Press Advisor has already been replaced, and this week a female friend of Sarah Netanyahu was appointed as advisor for "Branding the State" (Anyone know what that means??)

In the meantime, Sara'le has returned to the spotlight. A former airline stewardess who met Netanyahu in an airport duty-free shop when he was still married to his second wife, she was universally disliked and served as a butt of jokes during her husband's first term. This time, efforts were made to keep her in the background. When the Prime Minister still insisted on taking her with him to Washington, Michelle Obama avoided meeting her. When he was due to visit several European capitals, she was struck from the list at the last moment. But it seems that she is very active behind the scenes, especially as far as crucial senior appointments are concerned.

Perhaps this country really does need a wonder sticker?