

## **On exiting from the safe room the survivor of the battle at Kissufim discovered that their State had gone**

Haggai fortified himself with his granddaughters and abstained from wasting bullets, Rivka was locked in darkness as bullets sprayed her home and Navah's father ordered her to wait for the terrorists with her hands raised. Even now, after they have been evacuated, they feel that they have been abandoned.

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translated from Hebrew by Peter Keeda

Reuven Heinick from Ashkelon, 15 years the manager of the cowshed of Kibbutz Kissufim is the last of the murdered in the settlement. On Friday, two days after the kibbutz residents were evacuated, he was caught in a terrorist ambush when he went to tend to the cows. "They waited for him at the milking station and they killed him, and then two tanks eliminated the terrorists", relates Haggai Grosswirt, a member of the kibbutz. "Now we will need a new milking shed".

Besides Reuven eight members of the kibbutz were killed in the attack on the kibbutz as well as six foreign workers. Those killed were: three members of the Zak Family, Ittai, Etti and Sagi, their 15-year-old son; Gina Smiavitch; Thom Gudo; Offer Ron; Saar Margoulis; Manucha Hulati; Anotci Sufahin; Chirt Sanosan; Piyah Stauss; Arnativ Kaison; Jakfong Jantasna and Trafong Klansvan. Another member of the kibbutz, Uri Ruso, fell in the battle at Kfar Aza. After a lengthy battle the kibbutz was evacuated on Sunday morning with the help soldiers. Since then the evacuees are being housed in a hotel near the Dead Sea. Their story is one of the whole attack: terror, helplessness and heroism.

Residents of Kissufim awoke to hear sirens at 6:30 and went to their safe rooms. "My father said that he heard reports of terrorists" relates Nava Firt, aged 19, a resident of the kibbutz. "I thought that it was just rumours, but then he saw a terrorist

wandering around the kibbutz". Firt's father prepared for a clash with the terrorist until he saw other armed men trying to break into the house. "Father was with a revolver and waited at the door and said that he has to respond" she describes. "But then he saw that there were another four armed men trying to enter. We stayed in the safe room where we heard them moving the dining-room table and we understood that they were in the house." When he understood what he was facing, Nava's father understood that he would not succeed against the terrorists alone. "He put the revolver down and told us to lie on the floor with our hands on our heads". We were very confused, why do you give up? But we understood that he was right, that we would lose this battle. We lay on the floor with our hands on our head. We stayed there for about two hours. In the meantime we heard them in the house, we heard them approaching the door [of the safe room]. They tried to open it but gave up and went away."

Firt and her family begged for help, but none came. "We wrote to everyone that there are terrorists here in our house. We contacted the whole world to come and help us. But we heard nothing. We understood that it was us against them and that we are alone."

Haggai Grosswirt, 64 years old, born on Kissufim, was at that time in his house, near the kibbutz fence, with his wife and their two grandchildren aged 9 and 6. Their daughter and two other grandchildren were in a different house, about 100 meters from them. When the attack started he barricade himself with a revolver and observed what was happening outside. "Six terrorists came from the west and there were another six from the east, and I sent out a notice that I have a revolver with 30 bullets and I do not think that I can overcome them", he recalls. When the terrorists came within 50 metres from the house, he suddenly saw a plane-of-sorts, possibly a drone, that fired and killed some of the terrorists. One was wounded and fled past Grosswirt's house. "I thought to kill him but my motto was to protect my wife and grandchild, that's what I have in life," he tells. From a nearby grove a tank shot the terrorist. "The work of the righteous is done by others" [biblical quotation?]

Later Grosswirt saw three more terrorists running towards him. "They stopped near the house, and I could see them in my lounge room. They skipped my neighbour's

house and came to me. I could hear them on the other side of the wall". At this point Grossweit was ready to fight the terrorists. "I had a battle plan worked out, my advantage was surprise in small place and I would annihilate them. I was waiting for them," he tells. But all the doors in the house were reinforced, they did not succeed to enter."

Throughout the many hours of the battle for Kissufim he saw the terrorists set alight a building of four apartments about 60 metres from his house. "They set fire to the building with the people inside, there was killed the Zak family." Another kibbutz member, who was unarmed and unprotected, managed to rescue from the building an aged woman with her foreign helper. At 3:00 [a.m.] the army came with another man from the kibbutz to collect us in an armoured vehicle. His daughter and her family also survived after having holding the handle of the safe room door while the terrorists tried to enter.

Gina Samititch, who turned 90 a month ago, was alone at home. My aunty spoke with her in the morning, and she said that there were terrorists in her home and that she was frightened and was standing against the wall, and then she said she had to hang up," recounts her grandson, Shmuel Harel. "We phoned again and again but there was no answer. We found her in the lounge room with a bullet in her head. It looked like an execution."

Also Thom Gudo was killed in the attack. His family tells their friends that he held the door of the safe room while his wife Limor and their three daughters, aged 4,6 and 11, hid behind him. "Something landed on the safe room, it is not clear if it was an explosive device or a rocket or some sort of shell," Harel tells. Gudo collapsed and fell on the floor next to his family. "His wife threw the girls out of the safe room window and fled without stopping until she reached an army unit. It is still unclear how she did this".

At about 13:00 the kibbutz electricity collapsed, and the residents were left in the dark in the safe rooms. "I was alone in absolute darkness, terrible darkness, I have no phone, the battery was finished, and suddenly there started shooting in the house, without cessation until they were met by army forces" relates Rivka Ben Ari,

aged 77. "I stayed next to the wall, I did not move." To Rivka's great fortune, she tells, the terrorists did not try to get into the house. "At one stage I had to go the toilet, I stepped on glass, I went by feeling my way, shaking all over, and I returned to the safe room."

When the army came to rescue them, Rivka feared to open the door for the soldiers. "I lay in bed, I felt that I was in a dungeon and then I heard a voices – "Rivka, Rivka', I was frightened to open until I heard a voice that I recognised, "It is Shai, don't be afraid", she relates. When she realised that it was Shai who was a member of the kibbutz defence unit, she relented. "I went out together with him, there were six or eight soldiers with weapons drawn, I hugged him and wept, he told me "It is al right, everything is all right". On the bus I managed to charge the phone, I had 999 new messages, 900 of them from my family. We wept our souls away".

The residents were evacuated to Hotel Leonardo at the Dead Sea. They have been there since then. They are all disillusioned at the way the State treated them. "For me, there is no State, it does not exist", says Grosswirt. "What does the Gashsash [Israeli comedians] say? 'Israel is called a state'. Who looked after us was the Tamar local council. Neither was there an army" says Grosswirt. Ben Ari was amongst the last to be rescued from the inferno – on Sunday at 09:00, more than 24 hours after the beginning of the attack. "There is no state, really", he said. However, there is Am Yisrael, amazing embodiment. They have opened everything [for us], doctor, medication, psychologist, all by volunteers".

At the end of hours of deathly anxiety in the safe room , family Firt was also rescued. "The heroism of my fourteen-year-old sister was when she dozed off all the time" tells Firt. "She fell asleep at 05:00, after ten minutes my father opened the window and said that he heard voices, we recognized the voice of the security officer, my father went out and shouted "The IDF is here". We exited through the toilet door, I managed to take the dog with me, but apart from that nothing else, we have three cats, I don't know what has happened to them."

Nobody knows what the fate of the kibbutz will be. Grosswirt says that he will return. "I have a home there, that is my life. I have left and returned to Kissufim four times,

he explains, "but for others I do not know, perhaps I am stronger, I might survive." Ben Ari does not have an answer. "It would be arrogant of me to say what I will do," he said. My son lives in Florida, he said to me 'Mum come' but I do have any plans to leave Israel".

For Harel it is certain that he will stay on the kibbutz. "We look to the future", he says. "It will be necessary to rebuild, we are already thinking how much it will cost, tens of millions, maybe more. On the Sabbath when we heard what happened the feeling was that we would leave Israel. What sort of f\*\*\*ing state is it? Sorry about the language, actually I am not sorry, but my thoughts are to the future – my grandmother and grandfather survived the kibbutz, it was not easy. We will absorb the hurt and return and build better."