

The Mossad Seductress Who Trapped Vanunu

**How 'Cindy' The Sex Spy Found A
New Life At An Exclusive Orlando Golf Suburb**

By Donald Macintyre
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She was the only missing player in the drama which ended in the 18-year incarceration of the man who first told the world Israel had nuclear weapons. But Cheryl Hanin, the agent who back in 1986 seduced Mordechai Vanunu in London, then lured him to Rome and into the hands of Mossad, who drugged him and smuggled him back to Israel, turns out to be alive, well, married and distinctly prosperous in Alaqua, Florida.

If the appetite of the Israeli public needed whetting for a story too improbable for fiction, the country's largest circulation daily has obliged.

On the eve of Mr Vanunu's release from an Israeli prison this morning, Yedhiot Arhronot yesterday painted, in the brightest of colours, a portrait of the woman who persuaded Mr Vanunu she was an American tourist called Cindy and sprang the trap from which Mr Vanunu will escape only when he emerges from Shekma prison in Ashkelon to a welcoming party of wellwishers and the world's press.

Then, she was an attractive, apparently open, and to Vanunu at least, very friendly 26-year-old. Lyrically, the paper described yesterday how 18 years on: "Cheryl, her husband and daughters live today in a private home in the middle of a green and manicured golf course. Cheryl drives in a blue town and country van, her husband drives a shiny Chevy Impala. In the pastoral landscape, white golf carts carrying the residents of the prestigious neighbourhood move about quietly.

"This is a dream residential compound for golf lovers, 25 minutes drive north of Orlando. Several hundred homes are spread out in the neighbourhood land, among artificial ponds and dense tropical growth."

To many Israelis, particularly in the defence and security establishment, Ms Hanin is a heroine who did her patriotic duty by ensnaring in a

honeytrap the man who betrayed the country's defence secrets. To Vanunu's many supporters in the international anti-nuclear movement she is the Mata Hari who destroyed the life of an idealist who thought he was acting in the higher cause of world peace.

Understandably perhaps, Ms Hanin - Yedhiot calls her by the married name of Bentov which she apparently prefers not to use - has a bad case of media shyness. "For me this is a black story and I just want to erase it and forget it," the paper quotes her telling a friend in Israel.

She has a history of moving on when confronted by the press. When The Sunday Times, who first published Mr Vanunu's sensational revelations of the secrets of the Dimona nuclear plant, discovered her living quietly in the northern Israeli town of Netanya in 1988, she left Israel for her native United States.

Since then, Yedhiot says, she and her family have not returned to Israel, although they still maintain a home in Kochav Yair, which, in effect, is their only link to Israel. She was "rediscovered" by the press a decade later and moved within Florida. Even her new life in Florida is not exactly a Yedhiot scoop. Last month the St Petersburg Times in Florida unearthed her again, and published a lengthy story which differed in some details from Yedhiot's.

It had her driving "a red Cutlass convertible" and estimated that her house was worth just more than \$500,000 (£330,000) rather than the \$1m value attributed to it by the Israeli paper.

Neither Ms Hanin nor her husband were keen to be interviewed. When approached by the American newspaper "the burly Ben Tov", dressed in khakis and a maroon knit shirt, declined a request for an interview, and when a reporter visited the firm's headquarters in downtown Orlando. "So long, see you later," he said, and quickly retreated to his office. When the American paper reached a woman last month by telephone, she replied: "I have no interest in talking." And hung up.

Yedhiot quotes a close friend in Florida as explaining: "She left Israel to flee the media and the people who burrowed into her life. This bothered her a lot. She was terrified about journalists who came into her home and asked her questions. She felt a need to run. Since this affair Cheryl wants only one thing: a normal, quiet life."

This is a very different life from the one which prepared her for her last major assignment. Gordon Thomas, author of Gideon's Spies, the Secret History of Mossad, wrote: "She was sent on practice missions, breaking into an occupied hotel room, stealing documents from an office.

"She was roused from her bed in the dead of night and dispatched on more exercises: picking up a tourist in a nightclub, then disengaging herself outside his hotel. Every move she made was observed by her tutors." After her training, Ms Hanin joined the Mossad unit that worked

with Israeli embassies, where she apparently posed as the wife or girlfriend of other agents.

Her last mission began when she engineered a meeting with Vanunu in Leicester Square and suggested a coffee, saying she was a beautician on holiday. Next day they met in the Tate gallery and began to see more of each other.

Peter Hounam, the Sunday Times journalist who had debriefed Vanunu, warned him that she could be a Mossad agent, but Vanunu insisted: "She is just a tourist who is critical of Israel. I think you would like her."

There were plans for Mr Vanunu to bring his new girlfriend to Mr Hounam's house but he cancelled because he "going out of the city". The trap, in other words, had been set.

Ms Hanin has until recently worked as an estate agent, as does her husband, also a former Mossad operative. Their daughters, aged 12 and 16, speak Hebrew, and according to Yedhiot, go every year to "the prestigious Scouts' camp in Atlanta, which teaches Zionism and has Israeli counsellors, to which Jewish children from all over the US come. The Bentovs are among the generous donors to the camp".

The paper adds that the person closest to Cheryl Bentov, whom she trusts unconditionally, is her mother, Riki Hanin, who lives close by and works as a property agent in Orlando and is very active in the Jewish community.

Yedhiot quotes one unnamed acquaintance as saying she has "exposed and shaky nerves. It was enough for her to suspect that her friends were talking about her big secret, for her to immediately cut off contact. Even relatives who talked about her found themselves banished from the family. She moves between discretion and paranoia".

In particular, the paper suggests, she is apprehensive that Vanunu, who is forbidden to go abroad for at least a year, will somehow make trouble for her after his release. The paper asks whether such seemingly unlikely fears are justified and remarks that "at least according to what Mordechai told his brother recently, he has no plans to get even with her".

Going home: a nation transformed by 18 painful years

The Israel into which Mordechai Vanunu will emerge this morning has changed in many ways from the one he left behind 18 years ago.

The first of the two Palestinian intifadas was still more than a year away; Yasser Arafat was in exile in Tunis, and not many people would have bet that Ariel Sharon, rebuilding his career as Trade and Industry Minister after being censured for the massacres at the Beirut refugee camps of Sabra and Chatila in 1982, would nearly two decades later be prime minister after winning two general elections.

And not only the politics have changed. Tel Aviv, next-door neighbour to the old town of Jaffa where Mr Vanunu is expected to live, has changed almost beyond recognition: its high-rise, architect-designed office blocks now dominate the skyline.

The private, upscale Andromeda Hills housing complex, rising above the slums of Jaffa, and where his home is likely to be, was not even on an architect's drawing board. In Tel Aviv, he may be amazed by the range of restaurants, wine bars and pubs in what has become a sophisticated, cosmopolitan city, where then there was a choice between staple Middle Eastern food and central European Jewish cooking.

Mr Vanunu may be initially bewildered by the almost universal use of the mobile phone - 20 years ago there was a six-month wait for a landline - perhaps even more so by multilingual, multichannel satellite television.

He may be surprised by the huge growth in Russian-speaking citizens of Israel - not all of them Jews - with their own newspapers and television stations, and by the gap between the wealthy and the poor in what two decades ago was still a highly egalitarian society. The soup kitchens of today were almost unknown then.

Another change has been the relative progress made in public and commercial life by oriental Jews, a class to which Mr Vanunu's own family as immigrants from Morocco belong, even if they are still disproportionately represented among the poor.

Another surprise may be the decline - or at least individualisation - in property, private pensions and differential incomes of the kibbutzim, then such a symbol of the old Israel.

He will probably find Israel, particularly Jerusalem, if and when he is allowed to go there, more pervasively religious; but also that the polarisation between the secular, reflected in the dramatic growth of the Shinui party in the last two elections, and the religious has sharply increased. Yet he will also find a phenomenon virtually unknown then: openly gay and lesbian people with their own bars and social networks.

But you wouldn't have to be as political as Mr Vanunu to realise how dramatically the political and security environment has altered. The West Bank settlements have grown substantially. He will not be accustomed to the multiplicity of checkpoints or by the fact that Israelis no longer shop freely in West Bank towns. And he will have to get used to the security man at the door of almost every bar, restaurant and office: suicide attacks were almost unknown 18 years ago.

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