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The Arms Race

by Yossi Melman

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What goes on behind the walls of Israel's Institute for Biological Research?

A case pitting an employee against directors of the institute threatens to lift the veil of secrecy at a top-secret institution.

By Yossi Melman

A multimillion-shekel lawsuit recently filed in the Tel Aviv District Court by an employee of the Institute for Biological Research in Nes Tziona promises to provide a rare glimpse into what transpires behind the walls of one of Israel's most hush-hush institutions.

The plaintiff, a veteran employee at the institute, has sued the institute, its director, Dr. Avigdor Shafferman, and the director of security in the defense establishment (an employee of the Defense Ministry) on the grounds he was harassed and emotionally abused by them for years.

What the 300 scientists, technicians, plant and maintenance workers do behind the walls of this institute, surrounded by orchards, is one of the best kept secrets in Israel, tightly guarded by the military censor. It's an institution that very rarely finds itself in the news, and when it does, it's usually because of some controversy or other. According to Israeli sources, the institute develops pharmaceuticals, vaccinations, treatments and antibodies to protect Israelis from chemical (gas) or biological weapons. That's along with its civilian research projects.

According to foreign reports, it also develops chemical and biological weapons. One of these reports said institute scientists had developed the poison that was meant to have eliminated Hamas political leader Khaled Meshal in the botched Mossad attack against him in Amman in 1996.

The institute and Shafferman have also been mentioned in connection with the development of a vaccination against anthrax. The problem was that this program, important as it may have been to national security, was born in controversy. More than a decade ago, with the full cooperation of the army and its medical corps, soldiers were volunteered as guinea pigs in experiments on the vaccine. They

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participated in these experiments, in complete contravention of the Helsinki Accords, which established rules for medical experiments on human subjects. The demands of these soldiers to be officially recognized as disabled veterans and receive compensation as such were rejected by the defense establishment, and the deliberations in the case continue in court.

Intelligence Online revealed that the institute received a grant of hundreds of millions of dollars from the U.S. government to produce an anthrax vaccine in return for handing over the results to the Americans. These reports intensified suspicions that Israeli soldiers had effectively been "sold" as guinea pigs to serve not only Israeli security interests but also those of foreign powers, in this case the United States.

The current suit against the institute was filed by Avisha Klein, who served, among other positions, as coordinator of the live animal department, where various experiments were conducted by institute scientists. He was also part of a team that developed an ointment to protect skin against mustard gas.

Klein, 55, holds a bachelor's degree in life sciences from Hebrew University and a master's degree in industrial management from Ben-Gurion University. He began working at the institute in 1982 and was considered a highly valued employee by his superiors, as letters appended to the suit testify, as do the various promotions he received. Among other positions, he participated in the De Soto project, details pertaining to which are not provided in the lawsuit. Dr. Tamar Kadar, who directed the project, praised his work and wrote, in a letter written in 1998 to the deputy director of the institute, Dr. Amram Golombach, that "most of the work on the project is based on animal experiments including pigs, rabbits and seals, and in recent years I have enjoyed and still enjoy Avisha's cooperation."

But that same year, the institute and its directors suddenly had a change of heart about Klein. In his suit, Klein notes that he requested and received permission to serve as a consultant on raising monkeys for export for a private farm on Kibbutz Urim in the Negev. In the end, the project never got off the ground because of organizational opposition to experimenting on and abusing animals. At the time, Klein's superiors at the institute said that he had never received permission to be part of the project and that he had forged the permits. It was then that a senior official of the security branch of the Defense Ministry, Humi Even Tali (currently director of the special assignments branch) launched a criminal investigation into Klein's activities.

In the wake of the investigation, Klein was suspended and Shafferman instructed him to "move to an abandoned and rickety shed filled with mice and rats which had formerly served as a storeroom," according to the suit. Klein spent three idle years in the shed, during which time he received his salary. Afterward, he took a short, approved sabbatical in the United States and then a two-year vacation without pay. Upon returning to Israel in 2003, he discovered to his astonishment that the institute had no intention of providing him with any position. "From that moment on" the suit says, "the plaintiff's condition deteriorated, and he sank into utter despair from which he has not managed to recover to this day. The plaintiff became depressed and joyless, and felt helpless in the face of powers with which he was unable to deal. This, while he was being threatened daily that he would be fired and while enduring ongoing abuse."

Klein continued to show up for work at the institute for five more years, during which time he remained completely idle. Nonetheless, the institute did not dare to fire him and continued to pay his salary.

In 2008, a new investigation was opened by the institute's security officer, Nissan Poran, and Defense Ministry interrogators - this time on suspicion that Klein had leaked information, which eventually found its way to Haaretz. The investigators confiscated Klein's home computer, which he said belonged to his wife. The next day, Poran issued a statement to all institute employees that was meant to denigrate and humiliate Klein. His employee identification tag was confiscated, and he was banned from the premises.

In his suit, Klein maintains that there is no basis to the suspicions against him and that he had fulfilled his "civilian and national duty to expose the corruption" of Shafferman. For these efforts, Klein is suing for restitution amounting to NIS 500,000, in addition to NIS 2 million in damages for the humiliation he endured.

Over the years, the state comptroller, the civil service commission, and the security forces have received complaints against Shafferman from other employees as well. In their complaints, these employees claimed that Shafferman was abusive, that he instructed them to work on his own private affairs, that he wasted research money and that even his travels abroad on sabbatical raised questions of conflict of interest. These complaints were investigated, but secretly, and were categorically rejected. The institutions investigating them never found any wrongdoing on Shafferman's part.

The suit that Klein has filed will be the first time that such claims will be publicly heard in in court.

In response to questions from Haaretz, the Defense Ministry said that it "completely rejects Mr. Klein's claim for damages supposedly caused by harassment and humiliation at work. The case is being heard in court, which will judge all aspects of the suit. We emphasize that all the steps taken in this matter by the Defense Ministry were taken with the

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