

Munich Massacre: Fifty Years Later

by Bruce Ogron

On September 4, 1972, I sat in front of the television and heard three words that shattered much of my remaining childhood and would chart the course for much of my adult life. Three words introduced an eleven-year-old boy, and millions more around the globe, to the horror of Arab terrorism. Three words that fundamentally altered the geopolitical landscape and changed the way people would live their lives, even to this day. The three words were spoken by ABC Sports caster Jim McKay, who was broadcasting live from the Summer Olympic Games in what was then Munich, West Germany. "They're. All. Gone." With those three words, McKay told the world of the brutal murders of eleven members of the Israeli Olympic team who were killed at the hands of the Palestinian terrorist organization known as Black September. With those three words, the world would begin to learn of the massacre of the "Munich 11."

The Olympics returned to Germany for the first time since 1936, known as the "Nazi Olympics." Hoping to present a different image to the world, the West German Olympic Organizing Committee promised this Olympics would be "The Carefree Games." Despite protests that marred the 1968 Mexico City Games, the fallout from banning Rhodesian athletes who had already arrived in Munich, and especially the West German forensic psychologist, Georg Sieber's, ominous prediction for a near identical scenario, which he called Situation 21, the Committee insisted that the games proceed with only a small security contingent and no overt display of force.

Without having been permitted to bring a security detail, Israel sent 28 athletes, coaches, and referees on August 21, 1972 to West Germany, many of whom were survivors or children of survivors of the Holocaust. The 20th Olympiad brought heroes like Jewish-American swimmer, Mark Spitz, who won seven gold medals and set numerous Olympic records, before it brought the world a new, televised horror.

Shortly after midnight on September 5th, the majority of the Israeli team returned to the Olympic village after spending the evening taking in a performance of Fiddler on the Roof. At the very same time, eight Palestinian terrorists were meeting in Munich's central railway station, putting together the final touches on their plan. Their goal was to storm the Israelis' apartments, take the Israelis hostage, and negotiate the release of 234 criminals incarcerated in both Israel and West Germany.

At 4:10 that morning, dressed as athletes with athletic bags (except they were filled with guns and ammunition), the terrorists hopped the village perimeter's fence (with the help of American athletes), and walked to 31 Connollystrasse. There were seven Israelis inside Apartment 1 when the eight terrorists reached their door and tried to get inside. A 285-pound wrestling referee, Yossef Gutfreund, heard the noise and ran to the door to prevent it from opening. He held the terrorists at bay long enough for weightlifting trainer, Tuvia Skolsky, to escape out the back window. The terrorists broke through and held six Israelis hostage. The terrorists went past Apartment 2 to Apartment 3, where the wrestlers and weightlifters were housed. After a fierce struggle, the hostages in Apartment 3 were taken to Apartment 1. What happened next can only be described as acts of tremendous courage pitted against sheer evil. The terrorists brutally murdered Yossef Romano and his coach, Moshe Weinberg. They bound the remaining nine Israelis and forced them to sit in a room with one of their dead teammates and guns pointed at them. For hours. In Germany.

The noise of gunfire awakened the Olympic village and by 5:00 a.m. the news had reached Munich's chief of police, Manfred Schreiber. Schreiber's cocky sheriff-style attitude belied the fact that he already had botched one hostage crisis. During the Second and Third Reich, the Germans earned a reputation for efficiency and attention to detail. It was that organizational competence that led to the systematic roundup of Jews for transport to the death camps. What happened over the next few hours amounted to German hubris and incompetence on a grand scale for all the world to see. The terrorists outgunned and outmatched the Germans. As every news station broadcast the hours-long standoff to millions of viewers, the Germans failed to realize the terrorists were also watching, and saw German snipers climbing the roof. After intense negotiations proved fruitless, the West Germans acceded to the terrorists' demand for a bus to transport them and the hostages to a helipad, where they would fly by helicopters to an awaiting plane at the airport in Furstenfeldbruck, just a few miles from Dachau.

At the airport, the Germans aborted their ill-conceived rescue plan when the ill-equipped and untrained snipers decided to bail. The terrorists quickly realized it was a trap and, after a ferocious firefight, all nine Israeli hostages (still shackled inside two helicopters), a German police officer, and five of the terrorists, were dead. The Reuters News Agency had erroneously reported that the hostages had been rescued, leading to celebrations in Israel and around the world. Then, Jim McKay came on the air and uttered those three words. "They're all gone."

David Berger. Ze'ev Friedman. Yossef Gutfreund. Eliezer Haflin. Yossef Romano. Amitzur Shapira. Kehat Shorr. Mark Slavin. Andre Spitzer. Yakov Springer. Moshe Weinberg. These are the "Munich 11."

Avery Brundage, the President of the International Olympic Committee, refused to cancel the games and only reluctantly agreed to a 24-hour suspension. The first televised terrorist attack occurred and the games simply continued, with nary a mention of the murdered Israelis by the IOC until 2016. Most people are more familiar with what happened next. Within two months of the massacre, the PLO hijacked a nearly empty Lufthansa airliner and the West Germans agreed to release the three remaining Black September terrorists. We now know that the West Germans were in on it and made an agreement to try to avoid future attacks on their soil.

Prime Minister Golda Meir debated long and hard but, after the terrorists returned home as heroes, she released Operations Spring of Youth and Wrath of God. Israelis struck fear in the Palestinians and the rest of the Arab world and had proven it would exact retribution no matter the time, no matter the place.

Before the beginning of the London Olympic games in 2012, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks penned these words to memorialize the massacred Israeli athletes:

In remembrance of the eleven Israeli athletes brutally murdered in an act of terrorism at the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich, because they were Israelis, because they were Jews. At this time of year, when we remember the destruction of our holy temples, and the many tragedies which have befallen our people throughout history, and continue to protest against those who hate our people, we pray to you, O God: Comfort the families and friends of the Israeli athletes who continue to grieve and grant eternal life to those so cruelly robbed of life on earth. Just as we are united in grief, help us to stay united in hope. As we comfort one another under the shadow of death, help us strengthen one another in honoring life. The Olympic message is one of peace, of harmony, and of unity. Teach us, almighty God, to bring reconciliation and respect between faiths as we pray for the peace of Israel, and for the peace of the world.

It has been fifty years since I witnessed that extraordinary act of violence. I have since witnessed several acts of terrorism a few thousand miles away and, recently, in my own backyard. I cannot help but wonder what today's eleven-year-old hears and what they will remember fifty years from now.

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