Robert Maxwell, Israel's Superspy: The Life and Murder of a Media Mogul


Reviewed by Robert Younes, M.D.

Robert Maxwell rose rocketlike into the stratosphere of international prominence, leaving a trail of sparks behind him as he burst brilliantly on the world scene. As his brilliance faded with the collapse of his business empire, and the world's attention turned to new events and crises, his name drifted into obscurity. The story of Maxwell's life, however, far transcends the brilliant flash of public display.

Authors Gordon and Dillon resurrect the life of Robert Maxwell, reconstructing this man who was born in 1923 to Jewish parents living in the obscure Polish
village of Slatinske Doly. As a young man, he transformed himself into an English
gentleman and World War II hero who was decorated by Field Marshal Montgomery
himself with the Military Cross for bravery under fire. In Great Britain, Maxwell climbed to
dizzying heights of power, wealth and prestige.

The authors' wonderfully detailed biography is based on multiple sources and interviews
with 54 people who had intimate knowledge of Maxwell and his life. In addition, 21 other
contacts supplied information that enriched the many details of Maxwell's personality,
character, skills and foibles. The end result is a multi-faceted portrayal of a person with
immense personal skills—and, unfortunately, many flaws. His biographers divide
Maxwell's many lives—all of which he lived with consummate skill and supreme
confidence—into four different and significant life trajectories: public, family, criminal, and
spy.

His public life as a media baron paralleled the life of William Randolph Hearst in many of
its details. At his financial apogee, Maxwell owned over 400 companies. From the ninth
floor of Maxwell House in London, he directed his vast business empire, relishing his role
as a potentate of publishing, communications, printing, technology, property, currencies,
gilts, and shares. He bought companies and pillaged and sold their valuable assets
piecemeal—always for a handsome profit. With his prodigious memory and his many
minions, he managed to keep track of all his holdings, always manipulating them to his
business advantage and the unfortunate disadvantage of his business partners, bankers
and creditors.

Maxwell entertained with lavish abandon, sweetening his business proposals with ample
doses of rich surroundings, women, vintage wines, champagne and abundant caviar.
Using a combination of arrogance and charm, he met and successfully engaged in
business deals with leaders in the rarified atmosphere of international finance and politics.
He was noted for his obsessive and shameless self-aggrandizement via his London
newspaper, The Mirror. Even his closest associates were astounded by Maxwell's
personal vanity. Those who knew him intimately observed that he frequently played fast
and loose with the truth.

Once his empire began to founder, his creditors discovered that Maxwell had used the
same assets multiple times to serve as collateral for his prodigious debt. In the end, it
became impossible for him to continue juggling his assets, and Maxwell's empire
collapsed. Bankruptcy was finally declared, with debts amounting to more than $1 billion—the
largest in British bankruptcy history.

Maxwell's family life, like that of many people deeply obsessed with making fortunes, was
almost non-existent in his later years. In 1944, he married Elizabeth Maynard, the
daughter of a French silk merchant, in Paris. Although he remained faithful for a while, he

eventually became a flagrant philanderer, bedding a succession of leggy blonde secretaries whom he showered with expensive gifts and vague promises of marriage after his divorce (which did not happen). His wife, Betty, rarely saw him, instead spending her lonely days at their country estate, Headington Hill Hall, raising their nine children. Their youngest, Ghislaine, was Maxwell's favorite, and he named his beloved yacht, Lady Ghislaine, after her. Two of his sons, Kevin and Iain, joined him in his business affairs and managed the final frantic search for additional funds to keep Maxwell's foundering empire afloat.

Maxwell's criminal activities began early in his career, culminating when the collapse of the Eastern Bloc set the stage for a feeding frenzy of fraud, deceit and theft of state assets. KGB and other Eastern Bloc intelligence agents—with whom Maxwell already had established contacts—moved into the business world following the breakup of the Soviet empire, and became the sharks that devoured the assets of state resources for their own ends. The underworld flourished, and Maxwell was there to help himself to a hefty 15 to 20 percent cut as he laundered their money through Bulgaria and Western banks. Soon, Maxwell had links to criminals who dealt in illegal arms, prostitution, money laundering, drugs, and contract killings—all of whom used Maxwell to launder their profits.

Probably the most audacious illegal business project with which Maxwell involved himself was Bulgaria's Neva network. The concept was simple: plunder Western technology through secret agents, produce the same technology in Eastern Bloc nations, particularly Bulgaria, then sell the goods to the Eastern markets. Maxwell set up the companies to carry out the work, then laundered the profits through his network of banks. At its inception, Maxwell did not envision that Neva would grow into one of the most powerful crime syndicates in the world, embracing the Russian mafia, the crime families of Bulgaria, as well as those in New York, Hong Kong and Japan. All the companies Maxwell formed eventually would come under one name—Multi-Group—which controlled a significant percentage of global profits from gas, telecommunications, oil, gambling, and money laundering.

In contrast to his criminal pursuits, Maxwell's life as a spy did not begin immediately. Following World War II, he dabbled in intelligence work at Berlin's Spandau Prison, where he interrogated captured Nazi leaders and gained a reputation as a skilled interviewer. He was good enough to be offered a position with British MI6 as a "super contact person." Maxwell did not accept the offer, however, and was soon classified by MI6 as a "Zionist—loyal only to Israel" and a person to be watched.

When asked to spy for Israel's Mossad, Israel's CIA, Maxwell eagerly accepted because of his great love for Israel—although the money he made in Israel was also to his liking. Following a visit to Israel Maxwell said that he had traveled everywhere in the world and Israel was the only place where he felt at home. In Israel he found the faith he thought he
had lost. Viewing himself as a savior of Israel's ailing industries, he shrewdly bought ailing Israeli companies and turned them into successful enterprises. Some of the companies became covers for Mossad. Maxwell also used his many contacts in the Russian government to work tirelessly to enable Russian Jews to immigrate to Israel.

As Maxwell made his rounds from capital to capital, meeting world leaders and exchanging gossip with them, the Mossad used him as its eyes and ears. The spy agency saw him as someone who could pass through any door in any capital and learn secrets to which even the Mossad could not be privy. Maxwell also became a source of information for his intelligence contacts in the Eastern Bloc, including the KGB.

Robert Maxwell traveled the world and peddled Promis, software the Israelis stole from Inslaw, the American company that developed the program. Promis could track data on any target subject by querying and integrating information from innumerable electronic databases, without requiring reprogramming. The theft took place when the Mossad's Rafi Eitan traveled to the United States impersonating an assistant prosecutor in the Israeli Ministry of Justice in Tel Aviv and met with William Hamilton, the inventor of Promis, at Inslaw. After his meeting with Hamilton, Eitan immediately went to the Department of Justice, and, through serendipity, acquired a copy of Promis. Eiten then worked through former Mossad agent Ari Ben Menashe, who found Yahuda Ben-Hanan in California's Silicon Valley to construct a back door to the program. This enabled the Mossad to monitor Promis and obtain the information the program developed as it worked for all who used it—friend and foe alike.

With the help of former Texas Senator John Tower, Maxwell managed to sell the software to the Los Alamos Laboratories, thus making Israel's Mossad privy to the innermost secrets of American atomic energy programs. When Promis was sold to Credit Suisse, Israel was able to follow the money flows from any government or business agency that used the bank.

Eventually the Mossad adopted the same process used by the CIA to hide its own money distributions. Maxwell ultimately sold Promis software worth over $500 million to the intelligence agencies of Zimbabwe, South Africa, Guatemala, Colombia, Nicaragua, Bulgaria, Egypt, East Germany, Poland, Belgium, Turkey, Thailand, Australia, New Zealand and China, to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the KGB—all of whom the Mossad monitored as Promis developed intelligence for the benefit of the owner—and, unknowingly, the Mossad.

Eventually, however, all of Maxwell's life trajectories ended in financial collapse and disaster. In his public life, his highly leveraged business ventures finally caught up with him, and he teetered on the edge of bankruptcy for almost a year. Because of this, the authors argue, he hit on the idea of threatening his Mossad handlers with public disclosure.
if the Mossad did not find a way for him to get out of his financial crisis. Concluding that Maxwell had outlived his usefulness, Thomas and Dillon believe the Mossad ordered his assassination. Three months later, on Nov. 5, 1991, Maxwell met his end some time after 4:45 a.m. on the aft deck of the Lady Ghislaine, as, on Mossad instructions, she cruised off Gran Canaria Island. Maxwell assumed that the Mossad was planning to deliver his requested $1 billion to be used to bail him out of his financial troubles. Instead, Israeli kidon slipped aboard and injected a lethal nerve agent into Maxwell's neck behind his right ear. He was then thrown overboard.

Robert Maxwell was buried on Jerusalem's Mount of Olives after Israel provided him a state funeral.

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