

How the Mossad Works: The Mystery of Israel's 'Prisoner X'

By [Der Spiegel](#)

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An Israeli agent commits suicide in his prison cell. Was he a traitor? The mysterious case of "Prisoner X," reported to be Australian-born Benjamin Zygier, provides an insight into the workings of the Mossad.

The Milan office building exudes elegance with its stucco facade, brass name plate, concierge service and expensive wooden furniture inside. There's nothing to suggest that the firm based here, which specializes in the sale of satellite communications technology, is a front for the Israel foreign intelligence service Mossad.

But the Milan company is reported to have hired Israeli agents who needed legends for their operations in enemy territory. One of them was Ben Zygier, an Australian Jew and a committed Zionist who emigrated to Israel as a young man. The company is reported to have vouched as Zygier's employer when he applied for a work visa at the Italian consulate in Melbourne in 2005. That, at least, is what Australian intelligence agents claim.

Ben Zygier died aged 34, just four days after the birth of his second child, on December 15, 2010, in a solitary confinement cell in the Ayalon high-security prison near Tel Aviv. He was reported to have hanged himself, even though he was the country's best-guarded prisoner, monitored by four cameras. His lawyer had met him one or two days beforehand and said Zygier had seemed normal.



His case made headlines last week after an Australian news program identified Zygier as Israel's mysterious "Prisoner X." What crime can the agent have committed to prevent even his guards from knowing his identity?

Israeli officials said he had been a danger to national security. His lawyer said the accusations against him were "serious." When Zygier died, Israel issued a gag order preventing media from covering the case.

'Access to Secret Installations'

The agent was arrested in February 2010, shortly after the Mossad had murdered the weapons dealer of Hamas in Dubai. Now there's speculation that Zygier was involved in that killing, and that he may have divulged secrets. Or did he have something to do with the

killings of Iranian scientists or software attacks against Iran's nuclear program?

There are no answers, but Zygier and two other Australian Jews who also worked for the Milan firm were reported to have been successful agents. "The nature of their business gave them access to military and secret installations," said an Australian intelligence source.

Zygier's case provides insight into the methods of Mossad. It shows how the service recruits agents and masks operations.

As a young man, Zygier got involved with the "Community Security Group" in Melbourne, a kind of Jewish citizens' defense league. These groups often have links to Mossad and are instructed by agents. Ben Zygier was probably recruited in this way. At around the same time, Paul Y. and David Z. were recruited.

Australian Jews are particularly attractive to the Mossad because of a quirk in the law: Australians are allowed to change their first and last names once a year. It's a wonderful way to adopt a new identity.

After he completed his education, Zygier emigrated to Israel. Y. and Z. also moved there. The three of them — all holding Israeli and Australian citizenship — got jobs with the Milan-based firm. Back in Australia, they applied for new names. Ben Zygier got the names Benjamin Burrows and Benjamin Allen. Y. and Z. also changed their names at least twice.

Under Surveillance

But in 2009 their repeated name-changing aroused the interest of the Australian authorities — especially when Zygier handed in his old passports, filled with Iranian entry visas. Paul Y. spent a lot of time in Syria, Iran, Egypt and Dubai. David Z., too, travelled to Iran several times. That wasn't just evident from his passport stamps. During one trip in 2004, he sought help from the Australian consulate in Tehran.

The three men were now put under surveillance whenever they went back to Australia. Britain's MI6 foreign intelligence agency also began to take an interest in David Z., who possessed a British passport as well.

Ben Zygier also attracted attention with his choice of friends. During a trip to Melbourne in 2009, his followers noticed that he was approaching Iranian and Saudi-Arabian students at Monash University.

Soon after that, a source told the Australian journalist Jason Koutsoukis that the three men were caught up in espionage. When he confronted Zygier with these accusations, he denied it. "I asked him why he changes his name so often," said Koutsoukis. "He replied he had personal reasons for that."

They spoke three more times before mid-February 2010. Zygier was getting increasingly annoyed, he said he just wanted to build a normal life for himself in Israel. During the last telephone call he shouted: "Fuck off!"

At this point the Australian authorities already planned to arrest Zygier for espionage. But the Israeli authorities were quicker. On Feb. 24, Israel informed a liaison officer from the Australian secret service in Tel Aviv that Zygier had been arrested.

Zygier died in December. Calls to the firm in Milan are only answered by voicemail. Paul Y. and David Z. are reported to be still living in Israel. Possibly under new names.

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