

TERRORIST COP

**The NYPD
Jewish Cop Who
Traveled the
World to Stop
Terrorists**



MORDECAI DZIKANSKY & ROBERT SLATER

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The NYPD Jewish Cop Who Traveled the World to Stop Terrorists

BY
MORDECAI Z. DZIKANSKY
AND
ROBERT SLATER

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“When good people in any country cease their vigilance and struggle, then evil men prevail.”

— *Pearl S. Buck (American author)
1938 Nobel Prize for Literature
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Dedication

To Zachary, Jake, and Talia

It is to you my children that I dedicate this book, hopeful that through vigilance, courage, and conviction, good will triumph and that you will lead meaningful and happy lives.

MZ

Acknowledgments

There is currently no universally agreed upon definition of terrorism. Common explanations refer to violent acts targeting civilians that are meant to create fear and are perpetrated for an ideological goal. My definition would also include the hell it wreaks on its victims, the physical and mental scars it leaves on its survivors and first responders, and the challenges and responsibilities it places on law enforcement and the public.

I never imagined that after spending a fulfilling twenty years with the NYPD fighting traditional crime, I would stay on to become a global terror expert able to contribute to securing New York City 5,600 miles from home.

I saw, learned, and relayed so much, but the fight against terrorism affected me so strongly on both a professional and personal level, I felt compelled to share my story and the lessons that I have learned while combating this evil.

Mine is a story of tradition, chance, perseverance, and purpose. My goal in writing this book is to demystify the terrorist, to empower the public, to stress the importance and value of awareness, and to shine light on the sacrifice and commitment of first responders.

I have many people to thank for helping me along my journey:

First, in loving memory and in tribute to two extraordinary men who shaped my life—

To my father, Rabbi Jekuthiel Dzikansky, whose quiet dignity and steady moral influence guided me throughout. A true gentleman of the Old World, he still skillfully blazed his own path while never forgetting from where he came. From him I learned that service to one's community is a noble and honorable path.

To my brother-in-law, Frank Kutnicki, more like a brother and truly my best friend. His life's example taught me the value of enjoying the simple pleasures in life, the ease of walking with honesty and integrity, and the fact that being a parent is life's greatest treasure. He was the essence of a gentle soul.

I am grateful . . .

That I met a talented, passionate, articulate, and ever-so-patient writer named Robert Slater. His commitment to our project and support from the get-go gave me encouragement to proceed. I thoroughly enjoyed our meetings and working together. And thanks so much to Naomi Ragen for the introduction; you made a great match! A special thank you to Bob's wife, Elinor, whose editorial contributions were very much appreciated.

To my NYPD Intelligence colleagues and friends: Donny P., Ira G., Howie S., Diana P., and Milton L. and all those who assisted me while I was stationed overseas. Keep up the great work; it really does make a difference!

For my Detective Squad partners, my extended "family"—Brian McCabe, Mike Bachety, the late Al

Renow, Mary Kennedy, Eddie Hennessy, Mitch Parker, and Juan J.—thank you for always having my back.

To my fraternal brothers in the NYPD Shomrim Society, the Detective Endowment Association, and the NYPD Chaplain's Unit; your friendship and support throughout my career will always be appreciated. A special thank you to Sam Miller, Ken Cardona, Brian Reilly, and Rabbi Alvin Kass.

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To the officers in the Israel National Police, including Gil Kleiman, Asher B., Anat G., Osnat H., and Duby Y.; thank you for letting me into your inner circle. I have only respect and admiration for the difficult work that you do. A special thank you to Esther T. and Michael C. from the Israel police Bomb Squad for your guidance and assistance.

To Eyal D. and Rami S. for your commitment and contributions to protecting both of our countries. Your cleverness and friendship are invaluable.

To my sister Adina for always being there for me. Your encouragement, support, wealth of knowledge on Middle East affairs, keen eye, and contacts were so helpful and very much appreciated.

To Liz and Jack R. for always making me feel welcomed and at home. Your love and support mean the world to me and the family!

For my friends despite the physical distance: Scott Flaum, Stuart Austin, and Joel Seidemann; friends for life!

I am in awe of . . .

The men and women of the NYPD whom I witnessed perform painstakingly difficult tasks on 9/11 and in its aftermath. Their selfless heroism and dedication to the people of New York were truly inspiring.

The officers of the Israel National Police who showed incredible strength and fortitude while under the merciless barrage of terror attacks.

I am blessed . . .

And thankful to have the support and love of an amazing wife. Meryl has stood by my side through thick and thin. Her strength, understanding, and encouragement define the true meaning of dedication to one's family.

To have three fantastic children: Zachary, Jake, and Talia. You make everything worthwhile and fill my life with joy. You reminded me how to smile and to treasure life's simplest moments.

Mordecai Z. Dzikansky
April 2011

Robert Slater adds:

When Morty and I spoke about this book for the first time, my gut instinct told me that he had a great story to tell. ~~As we talked more, I confirmed my original instinct: His story is dramatic, colorful, poignant, and unique.~~ I was confident that we would be able to produce a compelling insider's look at what it was like to be a Jewish police officer in New York and later in Israel. Few cops write their memoirs. Morty has. Over the course of the research for this book, Morty and I had numerous conversations about what should go into the book. Our meetings were very meaningful to me.

I have conducted countless interviews as a journalist and an author and often I could tell that the person I was interviewing was holding back certain things. Morty never held back. He felt that it was important to tell his story in its entirety. There is no better example than his brutally honest recounting of the suffering he endured toward the end of his career as his post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) set in. To his credit, he believed that it was as important to include the painful part of his career as it was his exciting adventures.

I have interviewed scores of political and business leaders, but never have I sat down with a homicide detective and been able to talk in great detail about his work, his cases, and his attitude toward his experiences. The subject matter was often difficult, but we both developed a certain detachment in regard to the awful events that Morty was describing.

Our attorney-agent, Lloyd Jassin, played a critical role in bringing *Terrorist Cop* into existence, and we thank him for his immediate sense that there was a good book in Morty's story, for his perseverance, and for his simply watching out for Morty and me.

We also want to extend our gratitude to Carole Stuart, Publisher of Barricade Books, who instinctively sensed that Morty's story was a good "fit" for Barricade. We have found her counsel wise in all aspects of the publishing process. Mark Morrell, Barricade's Print Production Manager, has helped to shepherd *Terrorist Cop* through the various stages of publishing, and we thank him. Suzanne Henry has played a major role in promoting our book as widely as possible at Barricade, and we appreciate her contributions.

In both Morty's and my case, it was obvious that we both looked to our wives for their wisdom and their experiences in helping us to shape this book. In providing her keen editorial eye to the manuscript, Meryl Dzikansky became a true "partner" in this enterprise and I want to thank her. Her counterpart, my wife Elinor, fortunately has had direct professional editorial experience, has edited many of my books, and in this case applied her editorial skills to *Terrorist Cop*. Because of her skills I know that the manuscript reads better, stays on message, and is, in its narrative, crisper. I thank her for all her hard work.

Finally, a word about my family, my three children: Miriam, and her husband Shimi; Adam, and his wife Tal; and Rachel; as well as our six grandchildren: Edo, Maya, Shai, Shani, Matan, and Ben. They are the joys of my life and provide the happiness and love that makes doing a book-length project possible. I want to especially note my fifteen-year-old grandson Edo's unusual, loving interest in my book career. He constantly asks me, "How's the book going?" Or "What's new with that detective book?" I love the questions; I love his expressions of interest in my career. See what I mean? He and the others are the joys of my life.

I dedicate this book to my six grandchildren in the hope and with the prayer that they will grow up in a world free of terrorism—and a lot of other evils.

Foreword

I resisted giving up my mission, my task, my job, even though I knew the time had come.

I resisted because of the adrenaline rush and the feeling that I was truly making a difference. I resisted because of all the praise that had been lavished on me—from my boss, from my colleagues, and most importantly, from the media.

I had accomplished so much. Everyone said so. It was an easy leap for me to read the newspaper articles about my exploits and then to imagine who would be playing me in the film.

PLUNGING INTO MY OWN HELL

And yet, the warning signs that I was plunging into my own hell were all too apparent.

There was the doctor whom I visited, who suggested in all seriousness that if I did not quit my assignment, I would soon be dead. Then there was the time I drove behind a bus and saw an advertisement on its side for a children's festival. My natural instinct should have been to look at the dates so that I could take my kids to it. But the only thing that went through my mind was what a vulnerable spot the festival would be for a terror attack.

I felt something churning inside of me.

I suppose I was burned out from the job. But, in fact, I was obsessed with my work, so obsessed that my workload diminished, I grew even more obsessed and I entered my own isolated world: My relationship with my wife and children suffered; with time on my hands for the first time in years. I poured all my anxiety into eating and put on far too many pounds.

I was not suffering the kind of mental collapse that carried a stigma. My ailment was post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD. Somehow, the emotions that I was experiencing were easier to absorb now that I knew my situation had a rational explanation.

It was all so ironic.

My job was to be the voice of authority; my tasks were to make sure that the awful scenes that I witnessed would never happen again. I suffered pain from our up-close encounter with the victims. And yet here I was, a victim too.

ADRENALINE RUSH

On these pages I will explain what caused that adrenaline rush; much more specifically I will describe who I was, what I did, how I reached the height of my profession, and how I saved many lives.

I will also relate how in the end I became so obsessed with my mission that it consumed me and I sank into my own private hell for a brief period that happily today is part of my past.

Here then is my story.

CHAPTER 1

Why Is that Cop Wearing a Yarmulke?

One day I would be called the Jewish detective.

As a youngster, I was Jewish, but I showed no indication of becoming a detective. I grew up in Brooklyn surrounded by “my people.” My father, Jekuthiel Dzikansky, born in Minsk, Russia, in 1911 was a rabbi, as was his father. Because my father lived the life of a modern Orthodox Jew, as a child I did too: Wearing a yarmulke, not driving on the Sabbath, observing *kashrut* (the Jewish dietary rules). I believed that Judaism would remain a part of my life forever.

But I had no idea then that one day I would wind up an NYPD First Grade Detective. My father wanted me to be a doctor, but he would have settled for an accountant. Most important to him was that I contribute something to society; that contribution, he told me repeatedly, would show my true value, not how much money I made, or how many houses and cars I accumulated.

As a child, I had no specific career ambitions. I did think fire engines and the pole on which the firefighters slid down were cool.

I was born in the fall of 1962 in the mixed community of Canarsie in Brooklyn. I call it mixed because it was populated largely by Italians but my housing projects were a melting pot: white, black, Hispanic, Jewish, and Italian.

My name at birth was Mordecai Zev Dzikansky, so formally I would be known as Mordecai, but most people would call me Morty.

My father worked at raising funds for Yeshiva University. One of the hardest-working people I had ever met, he believed so strongly in raising funds for Jewish education that he never complained about commuting to work three hours back and forth every day via public transportation, a bus and two trains.

My mother was a housewife and a volunteer for Jewish causes.

WE WERE THE POOR ONES

Only a handful of Orthodox Jews lived in the projects. the upper-middle-class Jews in Canarsie dwelled in nearby private houses. I guess we were the poor ones: We did not own a car (my father never learned to drive), but we did have a black-and-white TV (rarely watched). Despite their financial hardship, my parents insisted on sending me to a yeshiva, an institution devoted to Torah study.

When I was seven years old, I suffered the most traumatic experience of my life: My mother died of

cancer at the age of fortythree. Our household then consisted of just my father, my three older sisters Shoshana, Navah, and Adina, and me; in truth, home was not very stable, since my father was often not around because of his long commute. I often had to fend for myself.

My teenage sisters tried hard to take care of me, but I was more than a handful. My mother's death had a profound effect on my ability to concentrate. I was street smart but scholastically challenged; I probably would have been a good candidate for Ritalin, but who knew about such things back then?

In 1971, when I was nine years old, my father took Shoshana and me on our first visit to Israel. It had been over thirty years since he had seen his older brother, who had fled Europe and gone to Israel just prior to the Holocaust; his other surviving siblings escaped to America. That trip with my father and sister had implications for my future that I could not begin to understand at the time.

A SPECIAL PLACE

We flew to Tel Aviv. I saw a good deal of family, felt their warmth, and never forgot my first visit to the Western Wall, the holiest site in Judaism within Jerusalem's Old City. I knew that I was in a special place. In 1979, at the age of sixteen, I graduated from Adelpia Academy, a yeshiva boarding school near Lakewood, New Jersey.

I could not know it at the time, but all that yeshiva training proved wonderfully helpful later when I became a police detective; as I learned the ins and outs of detective work, the yeshiva "way" taught me to ask a lot of questions and to look at a situation in depth. The yeshiva also taught me to read and speak Hebrew.

At age seventeen, as a freshman in college, I began a year in Jerusalem in the Yeshiva University Israel program. Many Orthodox Jewish families sent their children to Israel as part of this program.

While in Israel, I had my own personal experience with Arab terror against Israelis. Between September 1979 and June 1980, while I was studying in Jerusalem, seventeen terror attacks were carried out against targets in Israel. Each time an attack occurred, the college did a head count to make sure that we students were all safe and accounted for. The image of those head counts remains with me to this day. Those were the first of my many encounters with Arab terror.

During my year in Israel I visited Sinai in 1979 when it still belonged to Israel. For the Passover Seder I was chosen by my school in Jerusalem to assist the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in spiritually leading a Seder at the IDF's base near Sharm el Sheik. I could not know it at the time, but ironically I would return to Sharm in 2005 under far more difficult and dangerous circumstances as an investigator.

After returning to New York in June 1980, I began my sophomore year at Touro College in mid-Manhattan, an off shoot of Yeshiva University, and majored in accounting. Accounting, I soon learned, was not my cup of tea. But what was? I had no idea. Unhappy at Touro, I wanted more of a party school.

I MIGHT AS WELL HAVE FUN

In September 1981, after a year at Touro, I looked for another college with a "party" lifestyle and

discovered Stony Brook University on Long Island, New York. Uncertain what to do with the rest of my life, I thought I might as well have fun. But I was definitely ripe for a suggestion of what I should choose as a career. When the suggestion came, it came out of nowhere.

I never did get to Stony Brook: One Sunday morning in January 1982 I had one of those moments when I suddenly realized what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. Basketball, as it turned out, provided the catalyst.

I was a basketball enthusiast; I loved the game, watched it, and played it Sunday mornings at the Jewish Community House in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. Leaving the court that day, I noticed some papers lying on a desk off to the side and picked one up out of curiosity.

It was a recruitment flyer for the New York Police Department, distributed by the Shomrim Society, which sought to enlist Jews in the NYPD; the flyer aimed specifically at recruiting members of the Orthodox Jewish community. At that time only two Orthodox Jews were members of the NYPD.

Until the 1970s the NYPD suffered from a reputation of being exclusive, dominated by officers who came primarily from two ethnic groups (Irish and Italian), who did not reflect the melting pot of ethnic groups they served.

To resolve the issue, the NYPD sought to become more egalitarian, encouraging minorities, such as Orthodox Jews, to join the force. Thus it was that I benefited from the more flexible schedule of exams that the New York City Civil Service offered.

At first the NYPD entry exams were given only on Saturday, making it impossible for an Orthodox Jew or a Seventh Day Adventist to apply to become a police officer. Then the Shomrim Society affected a change in the Civil Service rules so that Orthodox Jews could take the exam on a Friday; the test became known as the Sabbath Observance Exam.

As I read through the flyer, it sounded very heroic, exciting, cool, appealing—and different. Not coming from a typical twoparent family, I already felt “different” and so the questions asked in the flyer really tempted me:

“Are you looking for an exciting career? Are you eager to help the public? Are you looking to get involved?”

The questions reminded me of those army posters that urged you to be all that you could be—all you had to do was join the U.S. Army. At the bottom of the flyer was a word for Orthodox Jews, assuring us that we could take the exam on a Friday.

NEVER IN A MILLION YEARS

I had never given the idea of becoming a policeman an ounce of thought. Never in a million years would I have dreamed that this was what I wanted to do. I did not grow up watching cop shows on television, idolizing their antics. I never dreamed of carrying a gun or wearing a badge. But I liked the idea that becoming a cop would take me away from office work (well, not completely!).

Growing up in Canarsie, we did not need the police, and we had none of the fear that others had of

them. they were an enigma to me, sort of a nonentity in my life. I knew nothing of the reputation of the New York Police Department. In time, I decided that it was the finest police force in the world.

Orthodox Jewish youngsters were encouraged to pursue respectable Jewish-oriented careers such as being a rabbi, a cantor, or a teacher at a yeshiva. Or, they could enter the outside workforce and become a doctor, a lawyer, or an accountant. Becoming a policeman was not considered an option.

But as I stared at that recruiting flyer, the far-fetched idea of joining the police force sounded interesting.

OUT OF THE BOX

Had my mother lived, I most likely would have never finished reading the flyer. Had she lived, our home would have been far more stable, I would have been a much better student, and I would have never entertained such an “out of the box” notion as joining the police force. With my mother there, I would have gone to college, become an accountant, or entered one of the other traditional professions.

But she was dead; my father was frequently absent from our home. I felt I was free to pursue almost any career of my choice. I decided to take the battery of tests—physical, medical, psychological—for entry into the Police Academy, keeping Stony Brook as an option should I not pass the exams.

Strangely, none of the police officers who asked me why I wanted to join the force asked why an Orthodox Jew, wearing a yarmulke, would want to become a policeman. Instead, their only concern was that I was young (I was twenty years old) and largely devoid of what they termed “life experience,” which really meant work experience. It was true that other than minor part-time jobs—I had been a busboy and waiter—I had never taken on work that might have demonstrated that I was ready to bear the responsibility of being a cop.

I took the Friday Sabbath Observer Police exam with fifty other Orthodox Jews and Seventh Day Adventists. I can't say that I was overly confident that I would be chosen. As it turned out, I received two acceptance letters on the same day in June 1982. Both Stony Brook and the Police Academy offered me a place on their admission lists. Out of the fifty people who took the Police Academy test with me, one other Orthodox Jew and I got offers to join the NYPD.

Stony Brook would have probably been fun, but I still could not imagine what I might study there that would give me a career I wanted. I was, however, intrigued at the thought of becoming a policeman, and so the Police Academy was my obvious choice.

I entered the Academy in January 1983. I decided to maintain a low profile at first; I did not wear my yarmulke during classes.

MY SON THE COP

Until then I had not told my father that I was planning to join the NYPD. It was not that I feared his opposing my career choice. He had always had a great respect for the police. But I knew that this was not a career he had imagined for his son. He had never imagined introducing me to his friends, as “my son, the cop.”

I had a lot of respect for my father, and the last thing I wanted to do was upset him. So I decided to proceed gingerly, to wait and see if I got into the Academy.

Once I entered the Academy, I let him know that his son was going to become a cop. His first reaction was shock. “Oy,” was all he whispered. But, realizing that I had grown up and would be doing something positive with my life, he acknowledged that he was proud of my decision.

Of the two thousand students at the Academy, half worked from 7 AM to 3 PM, half worked from 3 PM to 11 PM. For me the only problem arose when I was assigned the 3 PM shift: How could I observe the Jewish Sabbath, which began at dusk Fridays, if I was expected to work during the Sabbath?

Fortunately, allowances were made, and on Fridays I was permitted to work the first shift, which ended at 3 PM, giving me plenty of time to get home for the start of the Sabbath. Some of my fellow students were jealous that I was able to worm out of the less desirable 3 PM shift. But I was pleased with the arrangement, even though juggling my schedule meant that I had to finish up my required exercises at the gym on a Thursday night at 11 PM and return to the same gym for more exercises the following Friday morning by 7 AM.

For others at the Academy the semi-military regimen was a new challenge; but I had gone through a similarly rigid schedule at yeshiva so I adjusted quite quickly. Still, it was an extremely grueling six months, both the physical part and the various academic disciplines. But when I graduated, I was in the best physical shape of my life.

THE COP AND THE YARMULKE

In June 1983 I graduated from the Academy and became a New York City policeman. It was agreed that I could wear a yarmulke on the job and that I would not have to work on the Jewish Sabbath, which lasted from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. For any amount of money I would not work on a Friday night or a Saturday. The only exception would be if I were in the middle of a major crime investigation where lives were at risk and I played a key role in the investigation.

Starting police officers are known as “rookies” for the first eighteen months of their careers. I was assigned to the “neighborhood stabilization unit,” number 12, or in NYPD shorthand, NSU12. We were forty rookie cops who trained together with seasoned officers in a specified section of New York City. The NSU12 included the 63rd, 67th, 69th, and 71st precincts. I was assigned to Crown Heights in Brooklyn, where the Chabad Lubavitch ultra-Orthodox Jewish community, one of the largest of the Hasidic movements, had a strong presence. Canarsie, where I grew up, was also in NSU12, so it was like going home.

The sight of a police officer can often scare people; but I must have seemed even more intimidating, or at least strange: Here I was, wearing a yarmulke, sprinkling my English with a little Hebrew, a little Yiddish; it was hardly surprising that ultra-Orthodox Jews had trouble figuring me out; was I one of them, confused, or just lost?

I certainly got a lot of stares. Serving with me in Crown Heights was Harvey Hecker, the very first New York policeman to wear a yarmulke. Harvey was the first Orthodox Jew to enter the NYPD; he joined two years before I did. When we walked around the community together, we looked like “Mut

and Jeff;” I was tall and Harvey was not.

MY FIRST COLLAR

On one freezing night in December 1983, assigned to a beefed-up holiday detail in Canarsie and on the lookout for robberies, I patrolled alone on foot. I was under instructions not to vacate my beat—a two-block shopping center containing a department store, jewelry store, and the like—except in an emergency.

To protect against the wind blowing fiercely off of Jamaica Bay two blocks away, I kept my gloved hands in my pockets. I had on layers of clothing underneath my uniform.

I had grown up across the street from the shopping center, so I had probably shopped there a thousand times. This was my first time back in seven and a half years. It was 5:30 PM and getting dark. Moving from store to store, I paid special attention to the stores that were still open.

Searching for a spot where I could hide myself from view yet still have a good overview of the shopping center, I found a place that would allow me to react quickly if necessary. Suddenly, a white male without a mask—later I would learn that his name was Terry Cogswell—emerged from a grocery store with a fistful of money in his left hand and a gun in his right. I would have to act on my own. There was no time to call for backup. My instincts told me to tackle him in much the way a linebacker would pounce on an oncoming halfback.

I moved toward Cogswell and within seconds he and I literally ran into each other. At six-foot-three and 220 pounds, I had been confident that I could hold my own in any physical encounter. But this was my very first brawl and suddenly the issue had become very real.

This all happened in a flash. Grabbing his gun, securing it in my waist belt, I put my knee into his back and cuffed him. “Oh my God,” I said to myself, “Holy shit.” I realized that I had just made a solo armed robbery collar, quite unusual for a police rookie.

Noticing that Cogswell was in a state of shock, I imagined he was asking himself over and over: How could a lone policeman, shivering in the cold, come upon him the second he exited the store? Cogswell could not have known, and I certainly did not let on, that I was in a similar state of shock—over collaring my first criminal!

Then I heard a strange sound off in the distance as if someone were taking pictures. And, indeed, that is precisely what was happening. “What the hell is going on here?” I thought, wondering how a newspaper photographer could have gotten to the scene so quickly.

One of the store owners came outside, and I urged him to call 911. I would have made the call but, because I was holding the perp down, I could not get to my radio. “Tell them that a cop needs help, and give them our location,” I shouted, trying to maintain calm and to sound authoritative.

I kept my knee on Cogswell’s back, not letting him get up, keeping an eye out for his possible backup car or accomplices. The last thing I wanted was for him to run on me. He tried to get up several times. “Don’t you dare fucking move,” I screamed at him.

Within minutes, the cavalry arrived, a half dozen police cars, sirens screaming, lights flashing. Never was I more relieved. Hey, I was just a rookie!

The whole episode was quite an awakening for me. Most of the time police work is routine and can be boring; but when something like the Cogswell incident occurs, it made me realize that I had to be ready—and fortunately I was.

Bringing Cogswell to the precinct, I quickly discovered that despite the cold chill outside that grocery store, I felt more comfortable on the beat than inside the paper-laden precinct. It was my responsibility to process the perp, but I needed senior police officers to walk me through the stages: How to fill out the necessary forms, how to voucher a gun, how to find a detective to interrogate the perp.

At one point a detective approached me and asked how I spelled my name, giving no explanation for his question.

“Why does anyone need my name?” I asked suspiciously, figuring that only harm could come from giving up my name.

“Don’t worry about it,” was the detective’s terse reply. Now I was even more suspicious.

NEWSPAPER PHOTO

I had no way of knowing at the time, but the *New York Daily News* had obtained a photo of my holding Cogswell on the ground, evidently from the amateur photographer who had heard of the incident on a police scanner and snapped the photo. Now the newspaper was asking how to spell my name. Had I been told why I was asked to reveal my name, I would have dropped my suspicions and laughed out loud.

By the time I returned to my precinct in Crown Heights at midnight, the news of my collar was all over the community. Everyone, so it seemed, had heard that I had made an armed robbery arrest on my own. I was touted as some kind of a hero.

When our midnight shift ended, it was the custom for a bunch of us police rookies to go to Bay Ridge, another community in Brooklyn, for a few beers. Three hours later we found a diner for breakfast. Getting together like that proved a great bonding experience for us, eager to exchange news about our adventures earlier in the night.

This was my night. I was the guy who had made the armed robbery arrest. At one point, one of my buddies picked up a copy of the “Night Owl” edition of the *New York Daily News*, and there on the front page was a photo of me wrestling the perp down to the ground. I looked at the caption, entitled “Sidewalk drama,” and could not believe that that collar had become a New York police story so swiftly.

I read each word, wondering how the report that my senior detectives and I had penned earlier that evening had wound up in a New York newspaper so quickly:

“Police Officer Mordecai Ozikansky puts cuffs on robbery suspect identified as Terry Cogswell, 27,

1232 E. 92nd St. Wednesday night on sidewalk in front of store at 2130 Rockaway Parkway in Canarsie. Police said Ozikansky spotted Cogswell burst from store with handgun in his belt and a fistful of money allegedly taken from register. Cogswell was charged with first-degree robbery, assaulting a police officer, resisting arrest, and criminal possession of weapon.”

During that first reading I was so excited that I completely overlooked the fact that the newspaper had misspelled my last name! Naturally I knew that once people who knew me saw the photo, they would recognize me and not think it was some other fellow named Ozikansky. That misspelling was the closest I came to being Irish!

My police buddies were proud of me. One joked that we ought to point out the photo to the bartender so that, upon realizing he had a genuine hero in his midst, he would dispense free beers to everyone.

The best part of my surprise collar and the newspaper coverage was showing the photo to my Dad, enabling me to let him know that I had done something positive. However, recalling how often he had told me, as a rabbi's son, I was not supposed to expose myself to possible danger, I was careful to play down whatever dangers might have existed during my collar. To my father, Jews were supposed to be scholars, not fighters.

To my great satisfaction, Cogswell was found guilty of armed robbery and was sent to jail for a few years.

The Cogswell collar and the newspaper photo made me feel what it was like to be a cop. Hearing those sirens and watching the cavalry arrive gave me great comfort that I was part of a larger organization there to protect the public—and me as well.

I realized for the first time how much I relished the publicity focused on myself. Getting my photo on the front page of a New York newspaper so early in my career had been too much to imagine or expect. I could not have been more thrilled when my bosses asked me to lecture my NSU unit to recount the experience on that freezing cold night.

I began with practical advice based on what I had learned the hard way: No matter how cold it is, do not put your hands in your pockets! If I had kept my gloved hands in my pockets, I could have allowed the perp to get the drop on me. Had the distance between us been greater, he would have easily been able to gun me down before I even had the chance to go for my weapon. I never had the chance to draw my gun but was glad for my tackling skills!

BIGGEST DECISION

Soon after my “15 seconds of fame” in the *Daily News*, in January 1984, I had to make the biggest decision of my career. I had served for six months in NSU12 and now my bosses were ready to give our rookies our permanent assignments. I would have to choose what location I wanted as my permanent beat. Because my decision would affect my career for a number of years to come, I wondered how I could possibly make the best decision for me.

A senior figure with the Shomrim Society, with the influence to try to get me assigned to any locale of his or my choosing, wanted me to pick Borough Park in Brooklyn, a Hasidic Orthodox Jewish enclave

It would be a good fit for “a nice Orthodox Jewish boy,” he suggested, convinced that this beat would enhance my career: I could develop my community affairs skills while eating kosher doughnuts.

To me, however, it would have been a dumb move. The Jewish community there would have relied upon me to resolve intracommunity disputes, a kind of community affairs tsar, depriving me of the time to catch criminals. I wanted true law enforcement. That collar in Canarsie had whetted my appetite for more such action. I gave the Shomrim elder a polite no.

Even though I had rejected Borough Park, I still hoped that the Shomrim fellow would help me get to a beat that I had hoped for. Therefore I was delighted when he asked me, “Well, where would you like to go?”

With a certain *chutzpah*, I quickly replied: “Somewhere in Manhattan, I’d like to be in the big city.” He promised to see what he could do about it.

In late January 1984 I was on foot patrol one afternoon in East Flatbush, Brooklyn, still with NSU12. On that day I would learn my permanent assignment, a beat that might last twenty years until my retirement. I was quite nervous.

One of my bosses, a lieutenant, radioed me to get over to the corner of Nostrand and Church avenues where I suspected he planned to drop this personal bombshell on me.

I was right.

“Moish,” he called to me as he drove up to the corner, “come on over.” “Moish” was his nickname for me. It was actually a nickname for someone named Moshe. I was a Mordecai and my nickname was Morty. None of this seemed to matter to my lieutenant.

As I approached his car, I noticed he was looking at a piece of paper, obviously the list of new assignments. Smoking a cigarette, he asked cryptically, “Moish, who did you fuck?”

I was so taken back by the question that I could only think of trying to humor him: “Recently? I can’t remember. Why do you ask?”

“Do you know where you’re going?”

I remained flustered. “No,” I replied, getting even more nervous. “Am I going to the Upper West Side?” Again, I was trying to humor him. Rookies didn’t get assigned permanently to the Upper West Side. We all knew that. “I don’t know where I’m going. Where am I going?”

Taking another puff, trying to act casual, the lieutenant finally revealed: “You’re going to the 79th Precinct.”

“Where’s the 79th Precinct?” I asked, embarrassed that I had no idea where that was.

“You don’t even know where it is? It’s at Eastern Parkway and Crown Heights. But you’re going to be on the other side.”

What other side was he talking about?

“Oh, that’s nice,” I said, trying to sound pleased.

THE KILLING GROUND

He told me the 79th was in the Bedford-Stuyvesant district and then he did something strange. He began to laugh.

What was I missing? Why was he laughing? Then I found out.

At the time, Bed-Stuy carried the police nickname, “Do or die in Bed-Stuy,” from its high rate of murders and daily shootings in the early 1980s.

“I thought you had all the juice,” the lieutenant smiled.

Then I understood. The perception endured that any cop wearing a yarmulke must have had the right connections, the political “pull” within the Department to write his own ticket. After all, as one of only three Orthodox Jewish cops out of 40,000 officers, I was thought to wield far more power and influence than I actually did.

Well, I had said no thank you to Borough Park and instead of getting Manhattan I had gotten Bed-Stuy. Okay, I’m up for it, I thought. I like action. This could be fun.

Starting in February 1984 I began my assignment in Bedford-Stuyvesant. I served there for a year. Joining me were seven fellow rookies, good friends who made the assignment, socially at least, a lot of fun. I began working the 12 midnight to 8 AM shift.

I learned quickly why Bed-Stuy, or at least parts of it, had an awful reputation for the cheapness of life. On one of my first nights there I got a sudden preview of what it could be like. We got a call that a teenage boy had committed suicide by jumping from the sixth floor of a building. It was the middle of the winter and I remember snow on the ground. The fact that it was the middle of the night made the whole scene surreal.

As the first responding officer, I had to do all sorts of things to preserve the “crime scene” and to interview people to confirm that he had indeed committed suicide; to make sure that he had not been pushed or had not struggled with someone else; to identify the body; to make sure his closest relative knew what had happened. I did all this while a number of distraught relatives were screaming hysterically.

GRAB HIS SNEAKERS

All of a sudden I heard a voice from a window upstairs shouting down to the relatives, “Hey, go get his sneakers.” The apparent suicide victim had been wearing brand-new sneakers; the person yelling down wanted to make sure that the family retrieved the “valuable” sneakers before the medical examiner’s office hauled the body away.

I thought to myself: “Oh my God! This kid has just taken a leap off a building and all this relative can think of is getting his sneakers.” This was a new world to me. Bed-Stuy was like the Wild West.

Normally if you heard loud noises, you thought firecrackers, but in Bed-Stuy you knew it was gunshots.

What I saw nightly, most police officers would not see in weeks, months, or years. A routine night could go from stabbings and shootings to a woman giving birth. It was constant. They called upon the police for anything and everything. The majority of the time I was on the scene a few seconds after the crime was committed.

As a twenty-one-year-old rabbi's son, serving in Bed-Stuy was very exciting, I loved it. But let me be clear: Bed-Stuy was not for the meek of heart; serving as a cop there was like watching an action movie, but instead of watching, you were participating. You were chasing bad guys, at least so it seemed, every two or three minutes—and they all had guns.

Bed-Stuy had many good people, but it had a bad element as well. Drugs were the rule and the bad guys had never heard of living by rules of engagement. It wasn't as if there was a tacit understanding not to shoot at cops.

My time spent in Bed-Stuy proved to be a true career-maker. Here I was, serving in one of the highest crime areas in the City of New York, a rookie cop who was quite the oddity with his yarmulke atop his head. Believe me, my life would have been a lot easier had I not worn the yarmulke that "invited" people to stare at me and wonder just what kind of cop I was.

But I had been wearing a yarmulke since the age of three, and though I knew that there would be those odd stares, I wanted to keep it on my head even while on the beat. The NYPD respected this religious practice and did not turn it into an issue. Wearing the yarmulke gave me self-confidence. Wearing it showed that I was proud of my religion and proud to be known as a Jew. I could have chosen to fit in, to dissolve into the melting pot and hide my Jewishness, but I was going to be who I was—and take the consequences.

I served in Bed-Stuy until January 1985 and then I worked another year as a patrolman in midtown Manhattan.

When I became a cop, my goals were very limited and I actually felt that I had reached them when I became a patrolman in midtown Manhattan. This time members of the Shomrim Society helped me transfer out of Bed-Stuy. A friend of mine from the Shomrim told me that a midtown Manhattan police unit needed someone willing to work Sundays through Thursdays rather than Mondays through Fridays. Since I was Sabbath observant, I was the perfect candidate. Manhattan was calmer, and the light weekend requirements permitted me to cover for colleagues who wanted Sundays off.

BUSTING DRUG DEALERS

In what seemed like no time I was honing my skills as an investigator, beginning to work cases that took me off of patrol and into the world of the detectives. The more I took part in that world, the more I liked it. In 1985 a joint Drug Enforcement Administration task force made up of NYPD cops and federal agents was working a case against big-time Israeli drug dealers. Because I was relatively fluent in Hebrew and had a passing knowledge of Yiddish, I was on a list of police officers who knew foreign languages. Task force members found my name on the list and asked me to help with the case.

I would not be needed for ongoing translation, they explained; instead, I would be placed in a van near a car where a confidential informant and an Israeli drug suspect were likely to converse from time to time in Hebrew. The informant would be wired and I would be needed to translate the Hebrew on the spot to other police in the van.

I volunteered in a heartbeat, and I was given a car, a credit card, and a small expense account. I became part of the task force for the next three months. It was my first taste of the life of detectives, and I found it quite exciting. That case led to my working other cases involving Israelis.

In my next Israeli-related case, a *New York Daily News* article identified me merely as “Morty, the Hebrew-speaking cop.” the reference amazed me, for I had been told that most cops never got their names in the newspapers and few got mentioned in the media with the kind of frequency that I had enjoyed—and so early in my rookie years.

Here I was, a police officer for only three years and I had been in the newspapers already twice. I was only twenty-three years old. That year I was promoted to police investigator, the first step on the way to becoming a detective.

It was March 1986. I began work in the Narcotics Division. Busting drug dealers was hardly what I had aspired to when I joined the NYPD, but it turned out to be a great career move. I knew that my recent rise to Narcotics was due in large measure to the occasional aid that I gave Narcotics catching Israeli drug dealers in New York; translating from Hebrew to English was not as exciting as chasing down criminals, but helping crack those cases gave me entrée to the Narcotics Division.

I was the first to realize that, at age twenty-three, I was still raw and inexperienced; but because my bosses needed a Hebrew speaker, I was able to get an early look into the exotic world of police investigation. Moreover, narcotics was one of the nearly automatic career paths in the NYPD. If I performed well in this new role, eventually I would become a detective.

AN EARRING, BEARD, AND LONG HAIR

The new police work, and a new appearance and dress code that went with it, helped me explain—to my family and to women I was dating—why I needed to wear an earring, grow a beard, and have long hair. I would reveal the true nature of my work only if I came under great pressure and needed to justify my strange appearance.

Though I knew that my new look was simply a prop for my new line of work, others thought that I had strayed from the basic principles of Judaism! Giving me the once over at Jewish singles events, women asked themselves silently: “Just who is this bum?” Once I explained that I was an undercover cop and that my father was a rabbi, they calmed down.

When I met my future wife in 1991, Meryl persuaded me to remove the beard and the earring. Those were not her type of look. She also “allowed” my long hair to remain for about five minutes!

WAITING FOR MY BLADDER

Not all police work had its John Wayne moments. Sometimes, pardon the expression, you just had to

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