

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 4-AWASHINGTON TIMES
17 June 1986

Israeli spy visited plant where uranium vanished

UNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL

Rafael Eitan, the Israeli named recently as part of an espionage ring in the United States, traveled in 1968 to a nuclear plant in Apollo, Pa., where large amounts of weapons-grade uranium disappeared and was allegedly diverted to Israel, according to documents released yesterday.

Mr. Eitan, a former chief of operations for the Mossad, the Israeli intelligence agency, was one of four Israelis who received U.S. clearance to meet with officials at the NUMEC nuclear plant in Apollo, Pa., on Sept. 10, 1968, according to information in declassified FBI documents.

Two reports on that meeting, included in thousands of pages of documents released recently under the Freedom of Information Act, listed Mr. Eitan as a chemist with the Ministry of Defense in Israel.

Anthony Cordesman, a former Pentagon official now a professor at Georgetown University and director of an Arlington, Va., defense "think tank," said Mr. Eitan's participation in the 1968 meeting was "extremely hard evidence" that he was operating with Israeli intelligence in the United States.

At the time, Mr. Eitan was a member of a select Israeli intelligence unit, traditionally associated with Ariel Sharon, a leader in the hardline Israeli Likud party,

that actively sought information about U.S. defense capabilities, Mr. Cordesman said.

"There is no conceivable reason for Eitan to have gone [to the Apollo plant] but for the nuclear material."

Mr. Eitan is a celebrated Israeli intelligence agent who was a member of a team that snatched Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann off a Buenos Aires street in 1960.

U.S. prosecutors earlier this month said Mr. Eitan directed the Israeli operation that recruited Navy analyst Jonathan Pollard, who pleaded guilty to selling secret American documents to Israel. Pollard's wife, Anne Henderson-Pollard, also pleaded guilty to lesser charges in the espionage ring, which dated from at least June 1984.

An FBI spokesman said the investigation was closed but could not comment because the Pollard case is still pending. Justice Department spokesmen also declined immediate comment.

Since the Pollard episode began with Pollard's arrest last November, straining U.S.-Israeli relations, Mr. Eitan has been given the post of chairman of a government-owned chemical conglomerate.

His participation in the so-called espionage ring, as well as that of Aviem Sella, an Israeli Air Force brigadier general identified as Pollard's first "handler," has

er the ring was a "renegade" operation as Israel has claimed and whether that government has cooperated fully in the U.S. investigation.

The small Apollo processing plant was the subject of a decades-long U.S. investigation into the suspected diversion of hundreds of pounds of enriched uranium to Israel. Code-named "Divert," the probe was first launched in 1966 when the government found that 206 pounds of enriched uranium had vanished from the plant without a trace.

The documents show that the FBI, the CIA and the Atomic Energy Commission, which has since been disestablished, spent 15 years trying to discover what happened to the uranium, investigating allegations it was somehow passed to Israel by Zalman Shapiro, a Jewish scientist who headed the Nuclear Materials and Equipment Corp. Later inquiries also examined whether U.S. officials may have known about the diversion and let it happen.

While Mr. Shapiro headed the nuclear plant in Pennsylvania, 267 kilograms, or 587 pounds of uranium turned up missing.

Mr. Cordesman said, "There is no question that material leaked from the NUMEC plant was used in the original Israel nuclear weapons." By some well-regarded intelligence estimates, Israel is said to have at least 100 nuclear weapons.

Israel has two nuclear plants, both heavily guarded secret installations. The biggest is near Dimona in the northern part of the arid Negev and was built in 1957 by France. The second is a small experimental station at Nahal Sorek, on the Mediterranean coast.

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