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Reporter's Detention Baffles Colleagues

Journal Correspondent Still Being Held in Iran

A WALL STREET JOURNAL News Roundup

J Gerald F. Seib is a reporter who is used to writing front-page stories, not being the subject of them.

But since Sunday, the 30-year-old Wall Street Journal correspondent has made headlines after being mysteriously held in Iran. The only brief explanation for his detention, via Tehran radio, is that Mr. Seib is suspected of being a "spy for the Zionist regime, who entered Iran disguised as a journalist."

To his family, friends and colleagues, any suspicion that Jerry Seib is a spy is absurd. A Journal reporter since 1978, he was one of more than 50 journalists invited by Iran to that country last month to view its battle against Iraq. A native of Hays, Kan., he is described as a man whose life has been built around both hard work and a deep religious commitment.

"Jerry lives his faith. His religious values coincide with his professional values, a special concern for accuracy and truth," says the Rev. Blaine Burke, who was Mr. Seib's journalism adviser at Thomas More Prep, the high school that Mr. Seib, a Roman Catholic, attended in Hays.

Wall Street Journal colleagues describe the quiet-spoken Mr. Seib as a consummate journalist—inquiring but careful, skeptical but unbiased, determined to present the truth, beholden neither to the U.S. government nor any other.

Outside specialists concur. "Mr. Seib's reporting on the Middle East has been, in my opinion, remarkably balanced," says James A. Bill, a leading specialist on Iran. "He has carefully explained Shi'ism to the American people and has been one of the few journalists who has accurately reported and explained the Iranian position in the Iran-Iraq conflict. As soon as the Iranian leaders recognize this record, they will undoubtedly release him."

Mr. Bill is director-designate of the Center for International Studies at the College of William & Mary and is the author of a forthcoming book about the U.S. and Iran, "The Eagle and the Lion."

In January 1985, Mr. Seib became one of the Journal's two Middle East corre-

spondents, based in Cairo, Egypt. The other is his wife, Barbara Rosewicz, a former reporter for United Press International, who also is from Kansas. The couple is assigned to travel throughout the Middle East, writing about events in the region and about its politics and culture. They spent months studying Arabic.

In 1985 and 1986, the two journalists reported from nearly every Moslem nation in the region, as well as from Israel, always returning to their base.

They were among the first American reporters to document the rise of the Shiite Moslems in Lebanon. In a June 1985 front-page article, they described the oppression of the Lebanese Shiites and their sudden emergence as the most powerful Moslem group in that country. In August 1986, Mr. Seib reported that Iran was reemerging as the dominant power in the Persian Gulf region, detailing a string of Iranian military and diplomatic successes.

Mr. Seib's coverage also included reporting on the Iraqi and Western perspective on the Gulf War. Last November, for instance, he wrote a detailed account of the alarm among Arab and Western nations over Iranian attacks on tankers in the Persian Gulf. In December, he wrote of the dismay among moderate Arabs at the U.S. arms sales to Tehran.

Last month, when Iran decided to invite foreign journalists to witness its recent battlefield successes in the war with Iraq, the Journal asked that Mr. Seib be included. His application for a visa was approved by name at the Iranian interest section of the Algerian embassy in Washington, which represents Iran's interests in the U.S.

In Iran, Mr. Seib traveled with a group of 56 other journalists, visiting only the sites they all did and asking the same kinds of questions. He wrote three major articles from Iran before he was detained without explanation by Iranian authorities Saturday.

Before his transfer to the Middle East, Mr. Seib gained extensive experience covering U.S. foreign policy and world events in the Journal's Washington bureau from 1980 through 1984. In the process, he sometimes riled U.S. officials with his disclosures about secret foreign-policy decisions.

In 1982 and 1983, Mr. Seib wrote many articles documenting American anger over the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and its aftermath. In 1983 also, Mr. Seib reported that President Reagan had secretly ordered U.S. AWACS radar-aircraft to Egypt

for a possible Egyptian-American attack on Libya. The Journal turned down a White House request to withhold the article.

In a 1984 story, he disclosed that President Reagan had secretly decided to throw U.S. support behind Iraq in its war with Iran. That same year, during a trip to the Middle East, Mr. Seib disclosed that Israel was producing nuclear weapons at its reactor in Dimona, despite assurances to the U.S. that it wasn't.

Mr. Seib joined the Journal after graduating from the University of Kansas in the summer of 1978 and worked in the Dallas bureau before moving to Washington. A rabid Kansas City Royals baseball fan, he quickly earned a reputation as a young man of varied interests and unusual maturity for his age.

Although Mr. Seib has been described erroneously in some news reports as being Jewish, he is a lifelong Catholic. He attended Catholic schools through high school, graduating from Thomas More Prep, where students now are maintaining an around-the-clock prayer vigil for him in the chapel.

Ms. Rosewicz says that she and her husband attend Mass in the Middle East and that Mr. Seib's country-by-country notebooks list Catholic churches in each of the region's major cities. She says that as a gift to her husband when they both went to the Middle East, she gave him a medal of the Virgin Mary. He wasn't wearing it in Iran, she says, probably out of concern that it would set off airport security devices.

Mr. Seib's visit to Iran is his first to that country. His longest article from Iran, a Jan. 26 front-page story, was a colorful account of how normal life seemed in Tehran, despite the brutal war on the border with Iraq and the controversy over American-Iranian relations. The story described Iranians at prayer, in the shops, even at Tehran's zoo.

"To a first-time visitor to this city," he wrote, "the most vivid impression is not of terror and turmoil but of daily life lived rather normally." Five days later, in that same city, he was seized by unknown men. He hasn't been heard from since.



Gerald F. Seib