

Vanunu

Ken Fleet

Ken Fleet, with Ken Coates, was joint secretary of the European Nuclear Disarmament (END) Liaison Committee, which organised the END Conventions, starting in Brussels in 1982 and continuing for the rest of that momentous decade. In 1988, he joined an international delegation to Israel in solidarity with Mordechai Vanunu, on trial as the whistleblower on Israel's secret nuclear weapons programme. Ken Fleet recounted Vanunu's story in this book review he wrote for The Spokesman in 1991, when the tenth END Convention was preparing to meet in Moscow.

This is a remarkable story of a remarkable man. It has political and religious drama, sex, spies, betrayal, kidnap, complicity in high places, self-sacrifice and tragedy, all revolving around deadly nuclear weapons. If it were a novel it would be fascinating, but strain credulity, yet it all really happened.

It was on 5 October 1986 that the world discovered the astounding extent of Israel's nuclear capability. The news appeared on the front page of the *Sunday Times*. On the inside pages, the story was filled out with a remarkable series of diagrams and photographs. The source of these revelations was a young Israeli, Mordechai Vanunu, who had worked as a technician at the Dimona plant in Israel's Negev desert for eight years. By the time the story was printed, Vanunu had disappeared and, it was later discovered, was already on his way back to Israel in chains, kidnapped by agents from Israel's secret service, the Mossad.

Vanunu has suffered greatly for his brave act. He was subsequently tried in secret for treason and espionage, and sentenced to 18 years in gaol. He has now been confined for over four years, alone in a tiny cell, under camera surveillance 24 hours a day.

It seems clear that Vanunu did not have any careful, well thought out plan when he took his photos in Dimona, and subsequently smuggled them out, undeveloped, in the luggage he carried when he left Israel for Europe and Australia at the beginning of 1986. It was his experience of the Anglican Community at St John's Church in Sydney, and the discussions in which he participated there,

that convinced Vanunu he had a moral duty to make his secret knowledge widely available to all. His meeting with the Colombian journalist, Oscar Guerrero, gave impetus to his decision and a channel through which it might be realised.

Guerrero was quite different from Vanunu in character. A vain, boastful man, who carried photographs of himself in the company of renowned statesmen or eminent religious leaders, (some, if not all, were considered forgeries by experts), Guerrero was a dedicated self-publicist who saw in the Vanunu story the means to fame and fortune, which were of little moment to Vanunu himself. It was Guerrero who told the *Sunday Times*' office in Madrid about Vanunu, and set in train the events which were to lead both to the exposure of Israel's nuclear secrets and Vanunu's incarceration.

Vanunu was under no illusion as to the gravity of his decision to go public, or of the likely consequences for his own safety. Peter Hounam, the top investigative reporter assigned by the *Sunday Times* to cover the Vanunu story, described how Vanunu was shaking like a leaf when he first interviewed him. Vanunu was right to be apprehensive. The power and ruthlessness of the Mossad are well known, and its contacts with other secret services powerful and pervasive. The book makes a convincing case that links with the Australian Special Branch and Britain's M16 were a factor in putting the Israelis on Vanunu's trail.

Peter Hounam and the handful of other journalists involved clearly went to great lengths to ensure Vanunu's safety after the *Sunday Times* brought him to London for, understandably cautious, editors to evaluate his sensational story. But the paper unwittingly gave away Vanunu's plans when they were checking out Vanunu in Israel itself. Even so, Vanunu might have been safe if his own frustration at the delay in checking his story had not made him careless.

It was while he was feeling lonely and isolated that an Israeli agent calling herself 'Cindy' was able to introduce herself to Vanunu as an American beautician and to win his confidence. When Vanunu's story, given to the *Sunday Mirror* by a resentful Guerrero, went off half-cock with a put-down, while the *Sunday Times* was still checking it out, Vanunu felt betrayed and in an exposed position. Cindy, unbeknown to his *Sunday Times* minders, was then able to persuade Vanunu to accompany her to Rome, partly on the promise that she had contacts who would help him to get his story published there. When they arrived, Cindy led him straight to fellow agents who drugged Vanunu and smuggled him out of Italy by boat to the land to which he had vowed never to return.

In a way, the most shocking part of this story concerns the subsequent Italian investigation into the kidnapping. We are familiar with the unscrupulous methods of Israeli intelligence, and with the insidious links between security organisations. We have experienced the prejudice of judges when they think they have to defend the security of the state. But we were entitled to expect better from the leading Roman lawyer, Domenico Sica, who was appointed by the Italian Government to investigate Vanunu's abduction from their territory.

Two years after the abduction, and six months after Vanunu's trial, all that Sica could come up with was the far-fetched explanation that the whole affair was an elaborate charade organised by the Mossad as a means of informing the world of Israel's nuclear strength. It is quite inconceivable that Israel would go to such absurd lengths to make this knowledge public, or would subsequently put their alleged agent in gaol for 18 years for his pains. But this account did have the advantage of denying that any kidnap ever took place, and therefore required no action by the Italian Government.

It is fascinating to learn how Vanunu evolved away from his origins to the awesome choice he was to make. Vanunu's parents settled in the Promised Land when he was nine years old. Mordechai was the second of eight children whose parents were pious orthodox Jews. In his youth he grew disenchanted with the religious conservatism in which he had been reared, and was described as solitary and withdrawn, both at the religious college from which he dropped out, and in the army where he did his national service.

Vanunu became highly critical of the Ashkenazi Jewish establishment, believing that fellow Jews of oriental origin suffered serious discrimination. After a brief flirtation with the extreme right-wing views associated with Rabbi Kahane, he openly espoused the cause of the Palestinians. His appearance at an Arab rally resulted in an interview with Shin Bet, the internal security police. Shortly after his encounter, he found himself on the list of redundancies scheduled at Dimona.

It was in Sydney that Vanunu discovered Christianity in the form it took at the supportive St John's Church, and through discussions with John McKnight, its rector and the co-author of *Trial and Error*. He was particularly impressed by the Danish philosopher, Kierkegaard, and his existentialist version of Christianity which stressed the duty of the individual soul to make its commitment to God by a 'leap in the dark'. It seems that Vanunu identified the decisive 'risk' that he was called on to take as the revelation of the secrets of Dimona, which he carried in his

memory and on two rolls of film he had taken.

Not least of the pain that Vanunu has had to bear has been his alienation from his parents. They seem to view Mordechai as a double traitor: to the religion of his forebears, and to the Jewish state. His brothers and sisters have visited him in Ashkelon prison, however, and his brother Meir has worked tirelessly, visiting many countries in his cause. The book is unfair to Meir, dismissing him as a left-wing activist who failed to understand Mordechai's Christian-based motives. This is far too simple. His Anglican mentors recognised his commitment to peace preceded his religious conversion, and became inseparable from it. Mordechai Vanunu's actions were, in fact, highly political.

Vanunu has said that the Israeli public had the right to know what was being done in its name. After his revelations, the large majority of Israelis seemed to be unmoved, and, if anything, rather comforted by the confirmation that their government possessed the power to retaliate, with nuclear weapons, against any Arab attack on the State. There was not much sign of even general uneasiness over the kidnapping, secret trial, and solitary confinement of Vanunu. There was an active, dedicated Vanunu Support Committee, which arranged a visit from a delegation of the European peace movement (this reviewer was a member) at the time of Vanunu's trial in 1988. But it only represented a small minority of the peace lobby in Israel.

Was Mordechai Vanunu's courageous sacrifice then in vain? After all it was generally believed that Israel possessed nuclear weapons even before Vanunu told his tale. Israel's studied ambiguity on this question only helped to fuel such suspicions. There had been doubts about whether Israel had ever tested its bomb, but these were dispelled by clear indications of joint Israeli-South African tests in the Indian Ocean in 1980, picked up by an American satellite.

Yet there is a wide difference between a vague suspicion of facts, kept close by complicit governments, and universal public knowledge of the vast extent of Israel's nuclear arsenal, which experts say makes it the sixth largest nuclear state in the world. It makes much clearer the imperative for non-proliferation to rise nearer the top of the disarmament agenda. And for the legitimate demands of the Palestinians for self-determination in their own state, as manifested in the *Intifada*, which was raging when Vanunu went on trial, to be fulfilled. These are the two causes for which Vanunu gave everything.

Perhaps Mordechai Vanunu may be consoled with the thought that, although the Lord whom he has chosen to follow was rejected by his

Jewish people, he founded a movement that went on to conquer the world. The difficulty is that, in a nuclear world, today's timescale is that much shorter: we cannot to be expected to give a millennium to effect transformation that is needed to realise Vanunu's agenda.

Unhappily, the Gulf War was about to break out when this book was published. The immediate aftermath of that tragic conflict is likely to mean an even more intransigent Israeli government backed by an American administration tied to the promises it has made to Israel in the course of the conflict with Iraq.

The prospect seems bleak indeed. But Vanunu himself has shown that ingenuity and fortitude is possible for a person with convictions of a sensitive conscience. Our peace movements have to embody those virtues collectively. These strengths are difficult to acquire, but we have mountains to move, and nothing less will suffice for the task.

Tom Gilling & John McKnight, Trial and Error: Mordechai Vanunu and Israel's Nuclear Bomb, Monarch, 1991

