

Dr. Henry Kissinger agrees to a father's request, to help look for his MIA son (a military intelligence officer and POW interrogator)

A LETTER TO HENRY

By Alex Mendelson, of blessed memory

Father of the late Israel Mendelson, who fell in the battle of Suez in the Yom Kippur War

In January 1974, after my son, Israel, was reported missing in action (MIA) on the Egyptian front during the Yom Kippur War, I heard on the news that the American Secretary of State, Dr. Henry Kissinger, would soon arrive in Israel. He and I were in the same class in elementary school in Germany and became best friends. I decided to write him and ask if he would be willing to help us get information from Egypt about the Israeli POWs and casualties they were holding.



Alex Mendelson (Malam Archive)

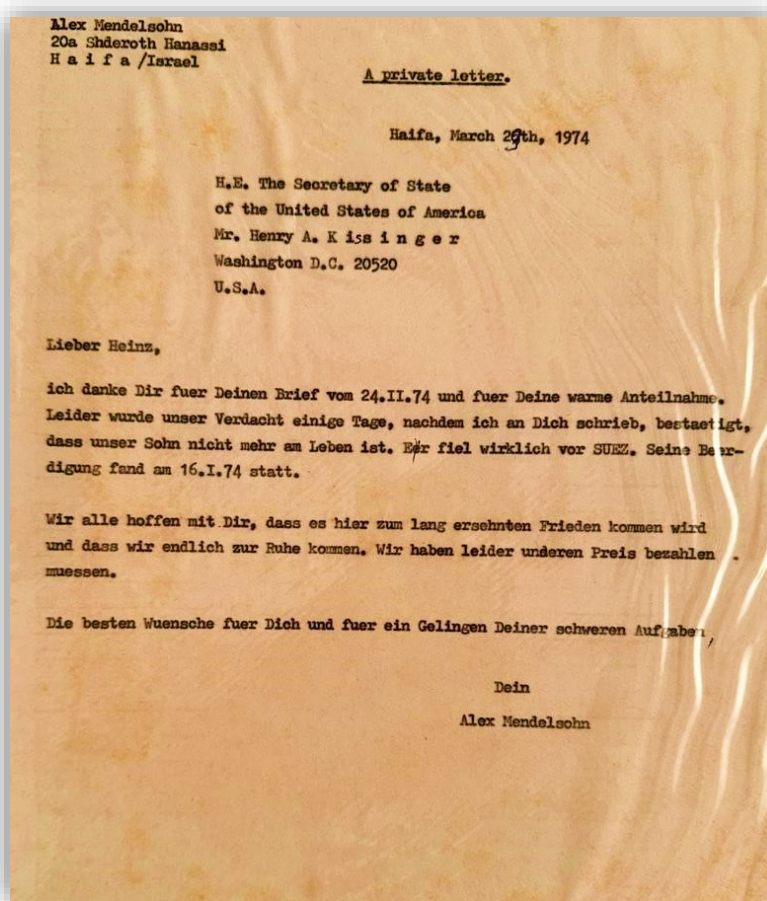
Since I had forgotten some of my German I asked my friend, the late Benjamin Younes, who managed a Children's Boarding School in the Ahouza neighborhood in Haifa, to help me write it. Benjamin and his family had been our family friends for the past three generations, since the time we all lived in Germany. "Help me write a letter to Henry Kissinger", I said, and told him the whole story. He helped me draft a letter and I copied it in my own handwriting. Now the question remained how I was going to deliver it to Secretary Kissinger, who was going to land in Israel on Saturday evening and meet with President Anwar El-Sadat in Egypt on Sunday.

So, on Saturday we drove with the letter to Jerusalem, to a friend who knew Yigal Alon, who at the time was the minister of education and a member of the Defense Cabinet. Mr. Alon lived in the Old City of Jerusalem and could not be visited without prior invitation. Our friend called him, told him about my son Israel and said, "Alex is with me and he wants to speak with you." "Come in," said Mr. Alon.

We then entered his house and he said, "I didn't know your son was MIA. I promise tonight I will give your letter to Secretary Kissinger, but, knowing him, I am sure he will take the letter and place it in his pocket, after which I have no clue what he will do with it. "We must try", I replied, "if only to stop the rumors that the other parents of MIAs are spreading."

Mr. Alon took the letter and we returned to Haifa.

Around 11:00PM that night Mr. Alon called me and said, "Alex, something astounding and unexpected happened. Secretary Kissinger saw the name on your letter and remembered you. He then excused himself, stepped aside and read it. After reading it, he promised me that tomorrow he would place the letter on the table in front of President El-Sadat and ask him for an answer."



Alex Mendelsohn's second letter to Dr. Kissinger (Dated March 29th, 1974. Malam Archive)

Hope is lost...

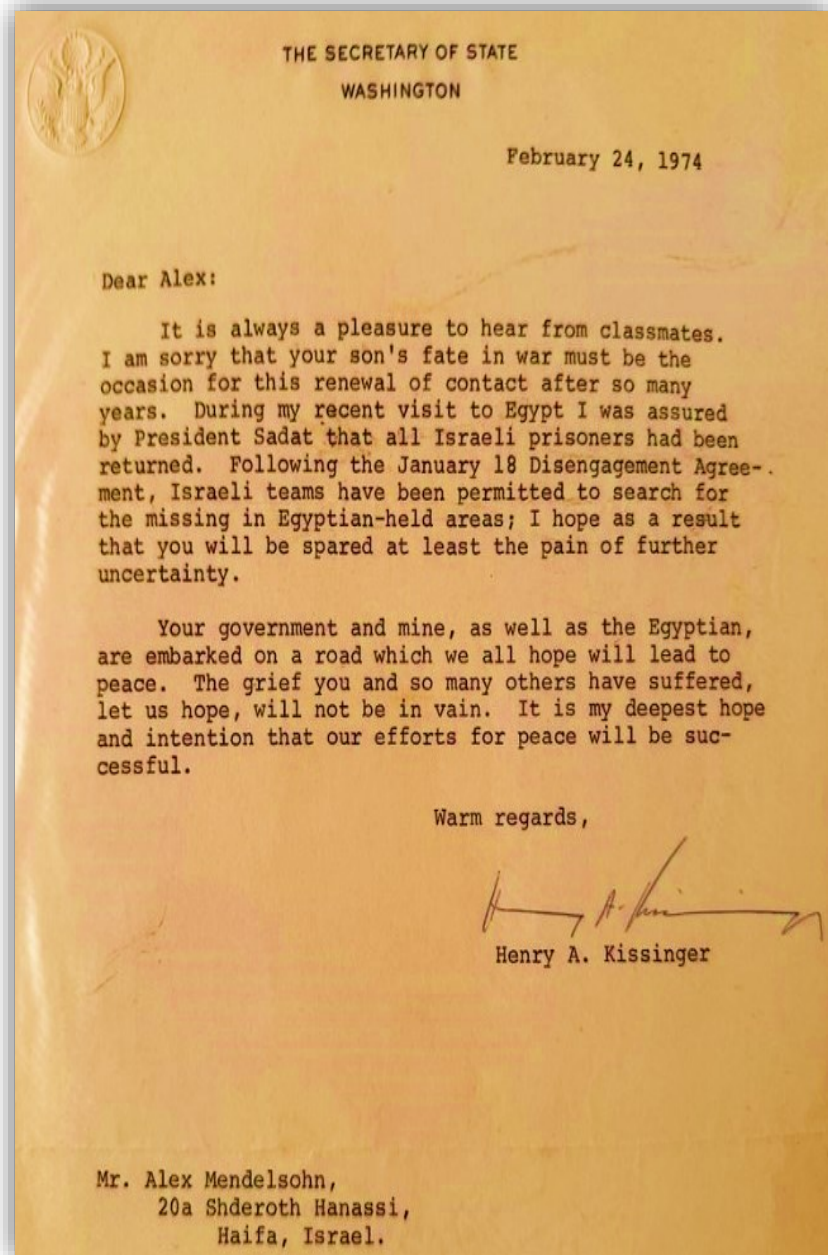
That same week the Israeli POWs held in Egypt were returned to Israel, and my son, Israel, was not among them.

A week after Secretary Kissinger's meeting with President El-Sadat, I received a personal letter from him, sent in an official US State Department



Dr. Henry Kissinger, wikipedia

envelope. In the letter he wrote he was very sorry we had to meet again under such circumstances and mentioned that he had given the letter to President El-Sadat and that he read it. President El-Sadat had learned German while serving in the Egyptian army units which supported Rommel's entrance into Egypt.



Dr. Henry Kissinger's answer to Alex (Dated February 24th 1974. Malam Archive)

Secretary Kissinger quoted President El-Sadat, who said, "There are no more living Israeli POWs in Egypt. We returned all of them in accordance with the agreement." Then Secretary Kissinger

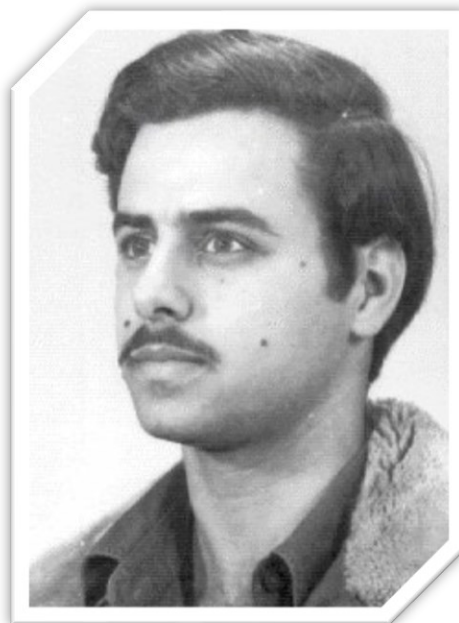
added, "I'm sorry to be the one to inform you of this." At this point we knew there was no more hope, and we would have to live with the grim reality.

The debriefing of the returning POWs reinforced the fact that there were no living Israeli POWs left in Egypt. They said a rumor was circulated about a locked room in the hospital with more POWs, but when a few of them managed to get into it, they discovered that it was only used to store medications.

There were two friends...

About two and a half months after communication with my son Israel had been severed, an IDF rabbinate representative came to us and said the Egyptians had returned the bodies of Israeli casualties (KIAs) and they needed our assistance to help identify them. The bodies were being kept refrigerated at Israel's Abu Kabir Forensic Institute, and the Egyptians had also kept them refrigerated.

A sergeant from the IDF rabbinate came to collect information that could assist them in identifying Israel's body. We rushed to collect evidence: dental photographs, a broken-arm X-ray from the HMO and X-rays from a stomach surgery he had. We were able to retrieve the X-rays at the last minute as they were about to be destroyed.



Captain Israel Mendelson (Malam Archive)

The sergeant sent to us from the IDF rabbinate was an amazing person, without equal. I cannot forget him to this day. He knew how to approach and talk to us, how to encourage us. An IDF officer named Tali also helped us a lot with all of the procedures.

On one occasion, when we went to speak with a senior IDF military intelligence officer in Tel Aviv for more information, we were invited to a meeting with the IDF Chief Rabbi. He wanted to prepare us for the possibility that all the casualties from the incident in which Israel was apparently killed would be buried in a mass grave. Of course, we told him, "That is out of the question. Let there be even a finger, but a finger of our son, and we will give him a Jewish burial. No mass grave."

In the end, with the help of the X-rays, Israel's body was identified. We set a date and time and held a military funeral at the military cemetery in Haifa.

At the time, the body of our son's best friend, Moshe Adino Sharabi, who was killed alongside him, had not yet been definitively identified. Before the war broke out Moshe Adino and Israel were roommates in an apartment in Kiryat Ono and they went to the war together. His whole family came to Israel's funeral from their home in Rosh-HaAyiin, and Moshe Adino's father and nine brothers all stood around the grave. When I was asked to say Kaddish, I turned to Moshe Adino's father and said, "Come and say Kaddish on Israel's grave. If they bury your son, I will say Kaddish on his grave too".



Captain Moshe Adino-Sharabi (Malam Archive)

He said Kaddish, then we read from the Psalms, and I then said a second Kaddish.



Captain Mendelson (left) and Captain Adindo (right) interrogate an Egyptian pilot, few days before they were killed in the battle of Suez (Malam Archive)

Captain Israel Mendelson and Captain Moshe Adino Sharabi served in Unit 154 (504) in the Yom Kippur war and joined Armored Brigade 500's intelligence unit as POW interrogators. On 24 October 1973, in the attempt to take over the city of Suez, they volunteered to enter it in the intelligence unit's APC to help evacuate the wounded. Their APC was hit, and they were both killed. Israel and Moshe Adino were considered MIAs for several months until their bodies were returned to Israel, and they were identified and buried.



Captain Mendelson (left) and Captain Adino (right), Interrogate an Egyptian pilot, few days before they were killed in the battle of Suez (Malam Archive)



Captain Mendelson (first, on the right side of the picture) and Captain Adino (to his right),
with Major Oded Barli, the 500's Brigade int. officer (Malam Archive)

Translation of Alex Mendelson's reply (second letter) to Dr. Henry Kessinger
(Dated March 29th, 1974):

Dear Heinz,

Thank you for your letter of February 27, 1974, and for your warm sympathy.

Unfortunately, a few days after I wrote to you our suspicions were verified and it became clear our son is no longer alive. He fell outside Suez. He was buried on January 16, 1974.

We all hope the peace and quiet we have been waiting so long for will finally come. Unfortunately, we had to pay the price.

Best wishes to you and for the success of your difficult task.

Yours, Alex Mendelson