

# Republic of Estonia on the Road Back to the West...

## Background and Reality of the Israeli Arms Deal, 1992/1993

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### ABSTRACT

In the early 1990s not a single Western government agreed to sell arms to the newly independent Estonia. As the constitutional government of Mart Laar (1992) declared a strong interest in Western collective security, even NATO membership, Soviet weapons became unacceptable and insupportable. In contrast, a plentiful supply of highly vaunted Western arms was considered a guarantee for the Republic's continued independence and a precondition for future acceptance in Western security policy structures – and ultimately membership in NATO.

Estonian businessman Leonid Apananski had tested the waters for a weapons deal with Israel already in the autumn of 1991. After Mr Laar's government had taken office in October 1992, our negotiations and contacts with the Israeli partners continued in Tallinn, Israel and Helsinki. The contracts for a secret deal were signed in January 1993 in Tallinn. We purchased armaments for a reinforced light infantry division and they were up to NATO standard. At a cost of 60 million US dollars they turned out more expensive than Chinese or Romanian weapons, but decidedly less expensive than European equivalents. Since Estonia lacked the financial resources for such a purchase at that time, the deal became possible only due to a favourable hire-purchase method, which took into account the expected economic growth of Estonia.

The associated opportunities for increased economic, political and security cooperation with Israel, that the negotiated arms deal may have presented, were lost before they were fully envisaged. The Estonian side leaked details of the contract, thereby violating the agreement. Estonian revanchist 'former' politicians, shoddy post-Soviet media and the ill-informed public have mostly attacked

the Israeli weapons deal over the last 20 years, even resorting, at times, to anti-Semitic comments.

However, this deal was one of the most significant achievements of our first constitutional government. It was a breakthrough in arming the Estonian Defence Forces and sent a strong signal to Western security decision-makers, who were compelled to recognize Estonia as a partner to be taken seriously. I am personally proud to have contributed to landing the deal, which was endorsed by President Lennart Meri in Tallinn and Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in Tel Aviv. Even today (2014) our Israeli arms are an important element in the arsenal of the Estonian Defence Forces.

## Background

As the Minister of Defence of the first post-war constitutional government, my work did not involve staffing, funding and structuring of the Ministry alone. My responsibility extended to reorganising the Defence Forces (National Defence Concept,<sup>1</sup> legislation, taking to task the mutinous (voluntary) light infantry company at Pullapää<sup>2</sup>), the dysfunctional Defence League, the ‘red *polkovniks*’, and procuring all kinds of equipment and material for our units. Our men basically lacked everything from socks and underwear to decent barracks, not to mention contemporary training and medical facilities and – oh, to dream! – apartments for officers. However, the most notable deficiency for the soldiers was weaponry. Only a well-armed national defence would be taken seriously.

When Mart Laar’s government was appointed in October 1992, the Republic of Estonia was almost unarmed, with the exception of a couple

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<sup>1</sup> See Hain Rebas “Accidental or Deliberate Failure? Story of the First Defence Concept of Estonian National Defence of 1993”, see this yearbook p. 217 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Hain Rebas, Raport ministeri Andri Meistri komisjonile, Tallinn, 23.8.1993; *idem*, “Eesti kaitseministri ametist lahkumine,” – *Eesti Teadusliku Seltsi Rootsis aastaraamat = Annales Societatis Litterarum Estonicae in Svecia, 2000–2003, XIII* (Stockholm 2006), 105–120; *idem*, “Kuid siiski...” Kaitseministri ametist lahkumine 1993. aastal,” *Läänemaa Muuseumi toimetised XI* (2008): 132–156; Imre Kaas, *Jäägrikrüsi anatoomia* (Tallinn: Pegasus, 2013).

of thousand<sup>3</sup> cheap Kalashnikov (AK-47) assault rifles manufactured in Romania. They were so imprecise that they were said to 'shoot around the corner'... Essential funds were lacking, too. For instance, the chief of supplies at the Ministry of Defence<sup>4</sup> routinely had to walk up to Toompea (the government's residence) to beg money for the Ministry's daily activities.

At the same time, we were seriously concerned about the fragile security of our fledgling state. Sergey Karaganov from our large eastern neighbour was formulating an aggressive foreign policy doctrine against Russia's 'near abroad'. Russia's Foreign Minister Andrey Kozyrev and Defence Minister Pavel Grachev made no attempt to hide their hostility towards Estonia. The mood around the mainly Russian-speaking city of Narva was constantly rebellious, and thousands of armed post-Soviet (now Russian) soldiers were carrying out manoeuvres in Estonia without any surveillance. The Russian 76th Guards Air Assault Division of Pskov and the *spetsnaz* units that had been training in Viljandi only recently, regrouped and continued activities just outside Estonia's southeast border. The country, and Tallinn in particular, was full of con men, mobsters from Krasnodar, Perm, and the Poultry Factory gang, agents and spies of many categories. The international metal business through 'Metallinn', supported by former KGB officers, was flourishing alongside all of the rubbish that this kind of activity attracts.

Our new government, which represented the spirit of the University of Tartu, was not prepared to tolerate this. The Constitution and referendum had given us a clear mandate to rehabilitate the state, to clean it up and to make the lives of Estonian people as normal as possible. We optimistically concluded that, to this end, we had to create a strong foundation on which we could build (as Archimedes had done in his day). We had to restore the Defence Forces of Estonia. If we had to, we would fight every possible enemy or attacker of the state. This meant that we had to secure weapons as quickly as possible: good weapons and many weapons.

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<sup>3</sup> Only two to three hundred Kalashnikovs were mentioned in public.

<sup>4</sup> Pointing out the weakness of the Ministry and especially its chief of supplies, Chief of Staff of the Estonian Defence Forces Colonel Laaneots spoke of him using the Russian word *бухгалтер* (accountant), which I understood very well, as I speak German. (Author's comment both here and hereinafter.)

This ‘Israeli arms deal’ topic has been the subject of heated polemics in Estonia for more than 20 years. However, unlike the debaters before me – of which there is certainly no shortage – I have tried to piece together the fragments of my recollections, the notes I took at the time, and the recollections of the individuals directly involved. Leonid Apananski, Priit Heinsalu, Ants Laaneots, Jaan Manitski, Jüri Pihl and Tiit Pruuli kindly let me profit from their recollections of the past.<sup>5</sup> Mart Laar also approved the text.<sup>6</sup> This database of sources, the contract itself (the English original) and the relevant protocols of the Riigikogu, provide a fresh angle to my account and make it possible to identify connections that have hitherto not been acknowledged. Despite this, I am not aiming for dissertation-style perfection, because archive materials and memories from the Israeli side have not been used.

## Task and problems

Estonia had tried to procure weapons before the autumn of 1992, naturally. However, every modest attempt to contact the West in this regard had failed. Against this backdrop, there was no question but that our new weapons had to be ‘Western’, i.e. without a hint of anything Soviet – not, as they said, ‘morally depreciated’. They had to be in line with the standards of NATO because we needed to demonstrate our firm desire to integrate with the West. However, Western leaders at the time generally held a

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<sup>5</sup> Scientist and businessman Leonid Apananski was the one who actually built bridges with Israel and masterminded the weapons deal. Mathematician Priit Heinsalu was the Secretary General of the Ministry of Defence at the time. Retired General Ants Laaneots was a colonel and Chief of Staff of the Estonian Defence Forces. Economist Jaan Manitski was the Foreign Minister in Tiit Vähi’s transition government in 1992 and later became a high-ranking state official. Jüri Pihl was the Director General of the Estonian Internal Security Service and later became the Minister of Justice. Journalist Tiit Pruuli was the closest adviser to the Prime Minister, historian Mart Laar, and proved to be the most operative member of his so-called back room. I would like to thank everyone for their kind support (and trust). I take full responsibility for any errors and (invalid) opinions. I have given delivered my e-mail correspondence with the persons named above to the Estonian War Museum.

<sup>6</sup> E-mail from Mart Laar to the author of 21 July 2014: “That’s the way I remember it. Thank you for all your great work, back then and now.”

pro-Russia perspective and did not entertain the notion that Russia may present a threat; nobody was prepared to sell us weapons. They all feared that this would weaken Holy International Stability. In fact, officials in Western capitals, especially in George Bush's Washington, distrusted us, largely unfamiliar 'Eastern Europeans' as we were seen, with Russian soldiers, armed to their teeth, roaming about our countryside.

Yes, we had received a lot of general and valuable military equipment, but no weapons. For example, the Prime Minister of Sweden, Carl Bildt, who was always very friendly towards us, visited Estonia as early as the 27th of October 1992. In answer to my requests, he promised to send us old Swedish winter uniforms (m/58), bicycles and skis,<sup>7</sup> but not the Mauser rifles of Hemvärnet<sup>8</sup> that were almost a hundred years old and earmarked for destruction (m/96). We were also denied the ability to purchase the old Walther PP cal. 32 handguns of the Swedish police, even though they were to be replaced.<sup>9</sup> The Walthers were sold far away in South America... No matter who looked at us, we were seen as a tiny, complicated and bothersome neighbour with difficult domestic and foreign problems.

## Israel

But there was hope! Immediately after the government of Mart Laar took office, it became obvious that there was one Western state that would agree to sell us good, Western-style arms. That state was Israel, via its military manufacturer TAAS.<sup>10</sup> Estonian businessman Leonid Apananski had been given the signal in Tel Aviv, already a year before the inaugura-

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<sup>7</sup> So-called (ironically) 'Vita blixten' or 'White Lightning'. We later discovered that the shipment of m/58 winter uniforms we received hid a number of pre-war second-hand uniforms m/39, which comes as no surprise to anyone who is familiar with the main motto of the warehouse chief of the army of any corner of the world: "Always send out as much outdated and damaged stuff as possible."

<sup>8</sup> The voluntary territorial national defence organisation of Sweden, similar to the Estonian Defence League.

<sup>9</sup> I looked into this with Jaak Jüriado and Jüri Adams of the Estonian National Independence Party in 1991 and 1992.

<sup>10</sup> TAAS-Israel Industries Ltd. (also Israel Military Industries Ltd. (IMI))

tion of our government.<sup>11</sup> He tells us (2014), that the prelude to the weapons deal began in early autumn of 1991 in the Palace Hotel restaurant in Tallinn. Old acquaintances from their time in the Academy of Sciences, Foreign Minister Lennart Meri and Leonid Apananski – both educated men who dared to think big – were having dinner. Their discussions of foreign policy concluded with their mutual understanding that the independence of Estonia could not be guaranteed by international, diplomatic recognition alone; it needed strong financial and military support. This meant economic independence, general acceptance by the world of finance, national defence capacity as recognised by our neighbours, and well-trained and well-armed Defence Forces. Apananski, a man with many international contacts, proposed that Estonia could try to procure weapons from Israel. The enthusiastic Foreign Minister found the idea appealing, if utopian.

The next chapter was written in Tel Aviv, where Apananski was permitted to meet Prime Minister of Israel Yitzhak Rabin and his immediate circle via one of his acquaintances, who happened to be a family member of Rabin's. It became apparent that the opinion of leading Israelis about the future of Estonia coincided with that voiced in the Palace Hotel – free Estonia required guaranteed security in the form of arms and recognition of the world of finance. They also agreed that the USA and NATO members were least likely to provide weapons, and that Israel may be alone in extending this possibility. Despite Apananski's claim that a poor country like Estonia could not afford to purchase any large quantities of weapons, attorney Ran Gazit,<sup>12</sup> who had been authorised by the Republic of Estonia to enter negotiations, suggested an intriguing combination: namely, a national insurance company of Israel would pay for the transaction. Estonia could then be extended credit, i.e. the option to pay for the procurement in instalments, according to the country's future ability to make pay-

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<sup>11</sup> E-mail from Apananski to the author of 22 July 2014. This long and detailed e-mail message is the main source of the overview of the following prelude.

<sup>12</sup> Attorney Ran Gazit was authorised by the Deputy Foreign Minister of Estonia Toivo Kuldsepp to represent the interests of the Republic of Estonia. His remuneration was paid by Mr Apananski. (E-mail from Apananski to the author of 22 July 2014.)

ments, a reasonable and low-risk assumption. To process the plan Estonian promissory notes were to be created. They would then be internationally recognised as securities, as they would be guaranteed by a country whose authority in the world of finance was unquestionable – Israel.

Back in Tallinn, Leonid Apananski again met with Foreign Minister Meri, who had decided to proceed with the plan, as he considered it to be consistent with Estonia's interests. It was surely evident to him that this may be the only real opportunity to procure the weapons Estonia needed. An official document of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was issued, which appointed Mr Apananski the official representative of the Republic of Estonia in Israel. When he was received in the Foreign Ministry in Tel Aviv some time later, Prime Minister Rabin, via his bureau chief Eitan Haber, ordered the Israeli Ministries of Defence and Finance, the national insurance company, TAAS and other companies engaged in the military, to support Estonia's representative in any way they could.

Leonid Apananski now changed his playing field and won the support of the experienced Ambassador of the Republic of Estonia Ernst Jaakson in New York, with whom he met twice. Ambassador Jaakson was an old and cautious man and aware of the firm objection of the Americans, so he was sceptical about the success of the plan. Nevertheless, Apananski's old friend, entrepreneur and a leading politician of the Estonian Coalition Party, Riivo Sinijärv, who in 1993 himself became the Ambassador of Estonia to London and later the Foreign Minister, also supported the plan; he neither had faith in its success.

This entire prelude lasted from autumn 1991 to late summer 1992.<sup>13</sup> Then the results of the first constitutional presidential and Riigikogu elections in Estonia, due to take place in September 1992, were awaited. In September 1992 Lennart Meri was elected president and Mart Laar prime minister.

Meanwhile, by early June 1992, Leonid Apananski had managed to establish relations with Toomas Puura, deputy to Ülo Uluots, Defence Minister in Tiit Vähi's Coalition Party transitional government. On behalf of the Republic of Estonia, Mr Puura allegedly authorised Mr Apananski

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<sup>13</sup> E-mail from Apananski to the author of 22 July 2014.

(using the official stationery of the Government Office) to communicate “with Authorities and Institutions of Israel for the procurement of weapons for the Armed Forces of Estonia”.<sup>14</sup> I inherited Mr Puura from my predecessor Uluots when he left office at the end of October 1992.

My diary<sup>15</sup> reveals that I first met with Mr Apananski and Mr Puura by chance at Helsinki Vantaa Airport between 5.00 and 6.00 p.m. on the 19th of October. I was on my way to Tallinn to take up the position of Defence Minister. Suddenly, I saw a familiar face in the terminal – Colonel Laaneots! He was accompanied by two people I had not yet met. They introduced themselves as Leonid Apananski and Toomas Puura. They were on their way to Israel to study the Israeli arms industry and its products. General Laaneots recalls (2014): “Puura’s suggestion to fly to Israel in October 1992 and take a look at their military industry (which was how he formulated it) was rather unexpected to me and came a short time before departure. He said nothing about purchasing weapons. I met Leonid Apananski for the first time right before departure.”<sup>16</sup> In 1992 I already knew that Colonel Laaneots was an expert on weapons. When I asked Mr Puura directly during this chance meeting at Vantaa, he replied that yes, he was also an expert on weapons. “Great – let me know how it all went when you’re back in Tallinn!” I invited, in conclusion of our meeting.

Apparently, Mr Puura had told the Defence Minister Uluots, that he had been dispatched by Mart Laar and that the Government Office would cover his expenses.<sup>17</sup> There are several reasons to doubt this.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Government Office of the Republic of Estonia, 8 June 1992, No 1/6, copy in author’s archive.

<sup>15</sup> I still have the beautifully bound DIN A4 hourly diary *Tidkalender* that I got from Sweden. I used to take rather meticulous notes of who I met, when, and sometimes also what we talked about and what conclusions we arrived at. All of the dates and times given in this article are taken from the diary.

<sup>16</sup> E-mail from Laaneots to the author of 29 June 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Ülo Uluots, “Mälestused” /*Memoirs*/ (serial), *Rahva Hääli*, autumn 1993; “The visit had been approved in advance by candidate Prime Minister Mart Laar”, Toomas Puura, Presentation on Visit to Israel, 6 December 1992, copy in author’s archive. Mr Apananski, for instance, covered his own travel expenses. (E-mail from Apananski to the author of 22 July 2014).

<sup>18</sup> To Tiit Pruuli’s knowledge, Toomas Puura did not receive any authorisation or recommendations for travelling to Israel before Mart Laar took office on 22 October 1992. (E-mail from Pruuli to the author of 15 July 2014).



After taking office in Tallinn at the end of October 1992, I soon suspected my inherited deputy of corrupt transactions with regards to both the huge real estate and property left behind by the Russian army and with weapons from Finland. When I encountered him again in the Ministry (he had never bothered to inform me of his return or of the outcome of his mission), I asked him to deliver a proper written report about his Israel visit. His report was poor – one page sparsely filled with handwritten text. I asked him for a new, detailed report with all documents, conclusions and proposals enclosed, “by 3:30 pm tomorrow, on my table”.<sup>19</sup> Going through it with the author he immediately revealed his dilettantism about weapons. In fact, Colonel Laaneots with his very characteristic grimace had already managed to tell me as much on the 6th of November.

Colonel Laaneots had presented a long and matter-of-fact report with some modest ideas and progressive proposals. In Israel they had been introduced to the companies and products of TAAS as well as to weapons and equipment of Soviet origin that had been taken as booty from the Arabs and kept in warehouses after conservation. The possible purchase of weapons was only discussed during the last two days of the visit. Mr Puura had asked the Colonel to think about what the Estonian Defence Forces would need. Colonel Laaneots then drew up an *ad hoc* list, considering the weapons and equipment required for one light infantry division (ca 11,000–12,000 men). Money was not yet mentioned.<sup>20</sup> In the meantime, Mr Apananski had also visited the Ministry, leaving the impression of a well-informed and professional partner. According to the Prime Minister’s diary, his first meeting with Mr Apananski had taken place on the 4th of November.<sup>21</sup> However, President Lennart Meri had already informed the young Prime Minister about the possibility of a weapons deal with Israel. From this point onwards we enjoyed the strong support of the Prime Minister.

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<sup>19</sup> Hain Rebas to Toomas Puura (official), Tallinn, 9 December 1992, copy in author’s archive.

<sup>20</sup> E-mail from Laaneots to the author of 29 June 2014.

<sup>21</sup> E-mail from Pruuli to the author of 15 July 2014.

At the same time, Secretary General of the Ministry of Defence Priit Heinsalu announced sardonically that Mr Apananski, who in addition to owning Revalia Bank also owned two insurance companies at the time, had offered him the opportunity to secure everything – property, equipment and staff – concerning the Defence Forces, for a certain percentage. To put it directly, Mr Apananski had allegedly lured him with an excellent opportunity to earn quite a bit on the side.<sup>22</sup> Actually, there was nothing sensational about such an offer at the time.<sup>23</sup> But the more we thought about the idea of buying weapons from Israel/TAAS, the more appealing became – it was like a hot cinnamon roll you just could not resist.

The ‘Israel issue’ was coordinated among others at the government session held on the 15th of November 1992.<sup>24</sup> On the following day, Mr Apananski and Colonel Laaneots discussed the plan with Prime Minister Laar.<sup>25</sup>

On the 19th of November I had a longer meeting with Colonel Laaneots and Mr Apananski during which the main topic of our conversation was, of course, ‘Israel’.<sup>26</sup> The topic was gradually heating up.

A delegation from TAAS arrived in Tallinn on the 3rd of December 1992. We had a meal at Rataskaevu Restaurant. The Republic of Estonia was represented by Colonel Laaneots, Adviser to the Ministry Colonel Priks, Secretary General Heinsalu, Mr Apananski and Jaan Manitski, an old friend from Gothenburg who had been the Foreign Minister in Tiit

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<sup>22</sup> Priit Heinsalu, then Secretary General of the Ministry of Defence, recalls: “The rumour circulating in the Ministry and the General Staff, probably leaked from the Security Police, was that four or five men had been offered bribes in relation to the weapons procurement. Apparently, only one of them took the bait.” (E-mail from Heinsalu to the author of 4 July 2014).

<sup>23</sup> The point of this article is not to reveal possible cases of corruption from 1992/1993. The relevant authorities of Estonia failed to do so then, and today it would be a largely hopeless and pointless endeavour from a legal point of view. Says Jüri Pihl, who was the Director General of the Security Police at the time: “[---] there were attempts to deceive the young Republic of Estonia, which had just regained its independence, and the businessmen involved had their own interests that weren’t exactly in line with good business practice, but we didn’t have anyone better at the time.” (E-mail from Pihl to the author of 13 August 2014).

<sup>24</sup> Diary 92.

<sup>25</sup> E-mail from Pruuli to the author of 15 July 2014.

<sup>26</sup> Diary 92.

Vähi's transition government and whom I had invited to come along,<sup>27</sup> and I myself. Back then Mr Manitski was one of the very few people in Estonia who had a background in major international finance. The Israelis were represented by Dan-Erik Melamed-Lemkow, attaché of the Israeli Navy to Stockholm and the representative of TAAS in Northern and Eastern Europe (a man with a Swedish background). The 'company', in the form of Mr Apananski and lawyer Ran Gazit, operated as the energetic engineers of the transaction. I managed to establish a personal connection with Melamed-Lemkow. We were about the same age; he came from Stockholm, and I from Gothenburg. The conversation at the restaurant was clearly a probing and preparatory one. Namely, we in Estonia had decided to grab this opportunity with both hands. Now we wanted to find out how far we could go, how far we dared to go.

As expected, we initially discussed broader matters, such as the history and politics of Israel and Estonia. Only after establishing some mutual understanding and familiarity did we get to the main topic – the weapons. We discreetly discussed possible quantities and delivery options and similarly tentatively touched upon money and payment methods. Fortunately for us, the Israelis were interested and seemed gradually to begin to trust us. I dare to venture that the experience I brought to the ministerial role – as a university professor in Sweden, Germany, Canada and Estonia – served in part to advance our relationship. I had taught topics such as the history of the European Jewry and the conflict between Israel and Palestine – the war of 1948 and of 1956, the so-called Six-Day War of 1967 and the so-called Yom Kippur War of 1973. Similar to Prime Minister Mart Laar, an historian, I was also well informed about the tragic fate of Jews in Estonia.<sup>28</sup> We later discovered that our informed and sympathetic background and the clearly Western European stance of our government paid off in subsequent negotiations.

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<sup>27</sup> We both belong to the Estonian Students Society (EÜS) and were on the board of the Estonian Student Body of Gothenburg in the 1960s.

<sup>28</sup> See Raoul Hilberg, *Die Vernichtung der europäischen Juden* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1994); the articles of Peter Puidu from early 1990 in the Swedish and Swedish-Estonian media; Kopl Jokton, *Juutide ajalooost Eestis* (Tartu: TÜ trükikoda, 1992).

The Israelis insisted that both sides had to be most discreet or the transaction would be called off. Of course we agreed. They were feeling the cold breath of Big Brother from across the pond on their necks, and we on our side knew only too well who from the East would be hell-bent on sinking the deal.

Israel was discussed again at the government session of the 8th of December.<sup>29</sup> We also gave the Ministry of the Interior (border guards and police/security police) an option to order weapons and other equipment from Israel. Our primary objective was to fully equip one light infantry division, i.e. more than 10,000 men, with weapons from TAAS. No, we saw no reason to be shy or modest.

On the 9th of December Leonid Apananski and Jaan Manitski visited the Prime Minister to once again discuss the Israeli weapons deal.<sup>30</sup> It should be noted that at its session of the 10th of December, the government allocated 500,000 Estonian kroons for 'Chinese weapons'.<sup>31</sup> Among other items, we bought 3,000 Kalashnikov assault rifles and ammunition from China. It was only natural that we procured weapons and equipment from other countries as well to the extent we were able.

On the 11th of December Colonel Laaneots came to the Ministry in Pikk Street with a list of weapons he had mostly chosen himself, their quantities and the official price list of TAAS. Together we headed to Toompea to give detailed explanations to the Prime Minister.<sup>32</sup>

An important ceremony of the Jewish community in Tallinn was held in the History Museum at 1.00 p.m. the same day<sup>33</sup> and I went there on my own initiative to represent the Republic of Estonia. This came as a surprise and maybe even a shock to the older generation who had gathered there.<sup>34</sup> Of course the government had to gain and maintain the support of the local Jewish community. At the ceremony I again met the Israeli

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<sup>29</sup> Diary 92.

<sup>30</sup> E-mail from Pruuli to the author of 15 July 2014.

<sup>31</sup> Diary 92.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> I cannot remember the reason – it could have been Hanukkah.

<sup>34</sup> My long friendship with Jakob Kaplan and Elhonen Saks dates back to this day.



*Estonian Defence Minister Hain Rebas (on the right) and Danish Defence Minister Hans Hækkerup in the NATO Headquarters (Brussels, 1993). Private collection of Hendrik Praks*

representation and also the Swedish Military Attaché, Colonel Sundkvist, a not insignificant figure in the context of this topic and article.<sup>35</sup>

At 10.00 a.m. on the 14th of December my diary notes “Puura”, and at 2.00 p.m. “Puura, Heinsalu, Pöder”.<sup>36</sup> With the support of the Secretary General and the Ministry’s lawyer, I invited my deputy – on suspicion of serious corruption – to leave the Ministry of his own accord that very afternoon. He complied. At 5.00 p.m. Mr Apananski, Mr Manitski and I arrived at the Prime Minister’s office on Toompea.<sup>37</sup> Once again, we collec-

<sup>35</sup> Due to my Swedish military background (P 7, I 13, Fst Und/Säk: South Skåne Regiment, Dalarna Regiment, Military Intelligence and Security Department of the Supreme Commander Headquarters) I thought of Colonel Sundkvist as a colleague, ‘one of us’, which is what he also proved to be.

<sup>36</sup> Diary 92.

<sup>37</sup> The diary of Tiit Pruuli confirms the same. (E-mail from Pruuli to the author of 15 July 2014).

tively scrutinized every detail of the pending Israeli/TAAS weapons deal, which now had reached its decisive stage. We also touched upon the formal problems related to the dismissal of my Deputy Minister. Finally, late in the afternoon, we agreed with the Prime Minister that the maximum amount for which we could order weapons was to be 60 million US dollars.

Things now escalated considerably. On the 15th of December I entered two personal telephone numbers of Mr Apananski and one personal number of Colonel Sundkvist in my diary. At 6.00 p.m. that evening I flew to Helsinki with Colonel Laaneots, Mr Apananski and Mr Manitski. There we were first taken to the Estonian Embassy and then to the Hotel Hesperia. I stayed in room 852.<sup>38</sup> The next morning we were to hold a confidential meeting with the TAAS delegation at the Hotel Inter-Continental.

## Preparations

The next question should be: how did Estonia prepare for this major political event that was aimed at breaking out of a vicious post-Communist circle, an event that could even be called historical? Were we really as naïve and helpless as we were depicted in many speeches and writings from those days and later?

My answer is that we did well, even very well. In any case we achieved the absolute best that was possible in Estonia at the time. In the meantime I had kept the President of the Republic *à jour* with the developments every two or three weeks during our late teas at Kadriorg Palace.<sup>39</sup> This is also where I regularly received the characteristically flamboyant feedback of Lennart Meri.

First of all, the *team*. There was no doubt that Colonel Laaneots, with his international background and battle experience, was the the Estonian who knew the most about the weapons produced in the world, and who was probably also the most knowledgeable about the arms trade. We

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<sup>38</sup> Diary 92.

<sup>39</sup> Lennart Meri and I had been friends since 1979.

should note that US Colonel Aleksander Einseln, our first Commander of the Defence Forces, had not arrived in Estonia at this point. Also, as all of his subordinates knew, Colonel Laaneots was 'crazy about weapons', i.e. he had a personal interest in, even passion for, weapons. I felt very secure next to such a technical expert.

It is noteworthy that I did not take along anyone from my own Ministry – where staffing was still incomplete – as a financial expert. Instead, I invited former Foreign Minister Jaan Manitski, who, prior to arriving in Estonia from Sweden, had amassed a great fortune with international transactions for himself – and for the Swedish pop band ABBA. I had complete trust in him and in his abilities from the time we met in Gothenburg in the 1960s, when he graduated from the city's highly regarded Handelshögskolan. His education of course included international commercial law. Concluding, I could not imagine a more capable team then, nor could I imagine one now (in 2014). Furthermore I knew that we had the solid support of Kadriorg (the President) and Toompea (the government). This spurred us on and boosted our energy.

Secondly, Leonid Apananski. Of course he was a businessman with significant personal interests. As a person, he was always punctual, business-like, even friendly. It was later that I discovered that he had quickly established relations in the governing Israeli Labour Party, even in the government, and knew a family member of legendary Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. In other words, Mr Apananski was a capable and intriguing person, but completely unfamiliar to me. In the interests of national security, and also to cover my own back, I ordered two background checks on him from two different sources – one from the Estonian Security Police, and the other from the Israelis. I presumed that if the latter – the world champions in intelligence – found nothing suspicious about him, then we too could carry on working together. Israeli Attaché Melamed-Lemkow gave me that reassurance.

The background check done in Estonia was prepared by Director General of the Security Police Jüri Pihl, who personally delivered it to me in the Ministry. We went through it together over a cup of coffee. There was nothing very sensational in it, and above all, no three letters acronyms... I smiled and decided to ask Pihl later about his statement

that Mr Apananski “in the past had financed the trips abroad of many leading Estonian politicians”. I wondered: whose trips, why and for what purpose? This document, signed by Mr Pihl, is probably still gathering dust in a safe or archive of the Ministry of Defence. In the end my possible concerns were satisfied by the reports that Mr Apananski did not appear to have anything obviously suspicious about him. In other words, we were dealing with a professional in international economic matters. However, I rejected his friendly offer to pay the travel expenses of our delegation to Helsinki: “The expenses of the delegation of the Republic of Estonia will be paid by the Republic of Estonia,” I confirmed.

Thirdly, *weapons and their prices*. Naturally, we did not only look at the quality, indicators and compatibility of the weapons and other equipment offered by TAAS; we also looked at the prices. To get a better overview we certainly compared them to the weapons and prices of other producers. I remember well sitting in my office, surrounded by all kinds of colourful catalogues and price lists. But as this was still relatively unfamiliar territory, I wanted additional assurances, and so I contacted the Swedish Attaché, Colonel Sundkvist, as ‘one of ours’.<sup>40</sup> I asked him to quietly investigate the quality and prices of TAAS’s weapons and tell me his findings. That is exactly what he did.

So, all three of us – the Defence Forces Headquarters or Colonel Laaneots personally, the Ministry, in other words I myself, and Colonel Sundkvist – arrived at the same conclusion: the weapons, i.e. all these Uzis, Galils, Negev, MAPATS and whatever they were called, complied with NATO standards and were of high-quality.<sup>41</sup> The main weapon, the Galil assault rifle, was a modification of the bulky AK-47 or Kalashnikov of the Russians.<sup>42</sup> If the mechanism of the Galil could handle the dust

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<sup>40</sup> Myself, Colonel Sundkvist and Carl Bildt’s special envoy Lars Peter Fredén (see his books *Förvandlingar: Baltikums frigörelse och svensk diplomati 1989–1991* (Stockholm: Atlantis, 2004) and *Återkomster: svensk säkerhetspolitik och de baltiska ländernas första år i självständighet, 1991–1994* (Stockholm: Atlantis, 2006)) agreed that we as a principle were not primarily working for special, exclusive national interests of Sweden or Estonia, but at considerably broader common and overlapping goals – getting life in the Baltic Sea region back to normal.

<sup>41</sup> Colonel Aleksander Einseln, who arrived in Estonia later, was very sceptical about MAPATS.

<sup>42</sup> The Galil was much bulkier than the American M16, but more accurate than the Kalashnikov.



and sand of the Sinai desert, it could certainly handle wet and melting snow in Estonian forests. And every soldier knows that just like engines, weapons also have to be oiled differently in different conditions! We soon learned that Israel had delivered its weapons all over the world, including the highly quality-conscious Switzerland and South Africa, but of course not to Arab countries. In terms of Israeli arms I could not even imagine anything below the highest level, as Israel is almost constantly at war and adjusts its weaponry according to the changing times and improvements of its enemy.<sup>43</sup> The knowledge that their enemies used Soviet or Russian weapons added a certain spice.

The only negative aspect of the Israeli/TAAS weapons was the price: they seemed to be horrendously expensive. In any case, we dared to hope for a decent discount because of the large quantity we were going to order and because of all the accompanying off-sets and spin-offs we were thinking of.

## Goals and mutual interests

Our negotiations with the TAAS delegation revealed that the Israelis were mainly interested in four things in Estonia. Firstly, Estonian forests and forest products – since they do not have the kind of ancient woods we do. Their population was growing strongly at the time due to the inflow of immigrants and they needed facilities, structures and houses, i.e. logs. Here, Estonian children who had finally been released from Soviet conditions, needed vitamins and healthy food. We sometimes even discussed

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<sup>43</sup> I hereby disagree with the official confidential opinion of Auditor General Hindrek Meri of 4 August 1995 (“Loe riigikontrolör Hindrek Meri salajast kirja valitsusele aastast 1995,” / Read a secret letter from Auditor General Hindrek Meri to the Government from 1995/, *Eesti Ekspress*, 15.6.2012, <http://ekspress.delfi.ee/news/paevauudised/loe-riigikontrolor-hindre-meri-salajast-kirja-valitsusele-aastast-1995.d?id=64544584> (accessed 5.9.2014).), that “some of the weaponry is unsuitable or unusable due to our climatic conditions”. I regret that I was away from Estonia in 1995 and that Hindrek Meri did not consult me about this. Besides, he failed to consider the actual and security policy situation in 1992 and 1993 in his bureaucratic and anachronistic presentation.

primitive barter deals – Estonian forests for the Israelis for Jaffa oranges and other fruits and vegetables for us.

Secondly, our Israeli partners had noted with concern that hostile Islamist organisations were getting closer to Europe through Russia. Apparently, Islamist cells were already present in Riga. Tallinn would then have been an excellent base for Israeli counter-intelligence. Thirdly, they were naturally hoping for foreign policy support from Estonia in the UN and elsewhere. The fourth aspect was the opening of a new eastern market via Tallinn, especially for the export of weapons. Exporting Estonian oil shale technology to Israel also seemed possible at the time. These, however, were topics for the Prime Minister and other ministers to discuss.

There have been claims in the media that the Israelis demanded, probably for Yad Vashem and the Wiesenthal Centre, archive materials about the crimes against humanity committed in German-occupied Estonia (1941–1944). Nobody ever requested such materials from me.<sup>44</sup>

So our major strategic decisions had been made: Estonia and its fledgling defence forces had to integrate with the West as quickly as possible; Israel/TAAS (who had their own specific interests in Estonia) were our only option for procuring western-style weapons; and cooperation between the Estonians and Israelis kept moving towards ever more interesting projects.

As our trust in each other increased, we found a principal payment system that satisfied both parties, i.e. the multi-annual credit or hire-purchase solution that the Israelis had proposed. No amounts had yet been discussed. We did not expect any pleasant surprise in this regard. At the same time, we pinned our hopes on Estonia's economic growth that had been forecasted for the coming years, as it would reduce the debt burden every year.

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<sup>44</sup> Years later, I heard that the materials of the notorious Klooga concentration camp that were kept in the Estonian History Museum had been sent to Israel. They can now be seen in the permanent exhibition of Yad Vashem. (E-mail from Toomas Hiio to the author of 20 June 2014). In 1993, the Israelis requested material about Evald Mikson, but were denied. (E-mail from Pruuli to the author of 15 July 2014).

Alongside weapons, we also requested instructors to teach our soldiers how to use them, as was customary. And whenever weapons instructors arrive, tactics instructors are not far behind. All of our existing tactics instructors came from the incondite Soviet army. We now needed junior and senior officers used to western-style warfare, who would first show us how to place these new weapons in position and then how to use them as a system in mutual cooperation, in defence and attack, from platoons up to brigades. This way, with the help of Israel, we would have taken a huge step forward in training our Defence Forces.

And speaking of expensive weapons, it is also necessary to maintain and repair them as required and to produce (cheap) ammunition, spare parts and other simpler products for ourselves. In these areas at least we wanted to be self-sufficient from the very beginning. This is why the Ministry of Defence planned to restore Arsenal – the pre-war Estonian military industry. The Israelis promised to help us with their expertise in this venture as well.

Throughout this time Leonid Apananski and Ran Gazit worked as tireless and inventive liaison officers between Estonia and TAAS, until our entry into the contract, and even thereafter.<sup>45</sup>

And last but not least, with the tactics instructors present, why not invite instructors in border-guarding and anti-terrorism? We definitely needed them. Because who knew what was in store for us? The Israelis were, and still are, among the top players in the world in these areas. For this reason, and on my initiative, we invited the former Chief of Staff of the Israel Defence Forces and present member of the management of TAAS General Dan Shomron to Estonia. He was a legend who in 1976 had brilliantly commanded the release of the hijacked Israeli plane and hostages at Entebbe Airport in Uganda. General Shomron visited Estonia from 21–23 March and met with the President and Prime Minister. Unfortunately, his presentation for our officers seemed to have no visible impact on them.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> E-mail from Apananski to the author of 22 July 2014.

<sup>46</sup> See Google and Wikipedia, for example: “Entebbe” and “Dan Shomron”; “[Situation is Critical] Assault On Entebbe Full Documentary,” YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v>

In sum, I maintained then, as I repeat today (2014), that we had done our homework as well and exhaustively as we could, considering the conditions in Estonia at the time. We arranged the best possible team, with everyone's roles well defined and coordinated, and both Toompea and Kadriorg supported us. Our partners were also seriously interested in further cooperation. We were feeling good as we went into the battle of negotiations in Helsinki.

### **Negotiations in Helsinki: Wednesday, the 16th of December 1992**

Over brunch at the InterContinental in Helsinki, it took us a couple of hours to prepare a contract that was more or less fit for signing. Colonel Laaneots showed remarkable grit and professionalism. This is how he remembers the events: "The negotiations with the representatives of TAAS were difficult. They started by telling me that most of the heavy weapons on the list I'd sent Israel would be left out, as the amount for purchasing them was too small. This concerned howitzers, 120-mm mortars and anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles. I still tried to stick to procuring complete weaponry and equipment (communication devices, flak jackets etc.) for 11,000 to 12,000 men. It was hard work, but we more or less achieved it after battling it out for several days. Our partners were not happy with us; I reckon they thought their profit was too small."<sup>47</sup>

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=TTEkQcYS0w8 (accessed 5.9.2014); see also the feature film "Operation Thunderbolt" (Israel, 1977), YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OFEDt0eVcTE> (accessed 5.9.2014).

<sup>47</sup> E-mail from Laaneots to the author of 29 June 2014. Laaneots also wrote: "They tried to make up for it later (i.e. in spring 1994) by shipping 50 used 23-mm anti-aircraft cannons to Estonia. Fortunately, we opened it immediately and started complaining at the levels of both the General Staff of the Defence Forces and the Ministry. In order to avoid scandal, TAAS promised to immediately send us new cannons and we could keep the old ones as a gift." This outcome did not really come as a surprise. (See also reference number 7.) The warehouse managers of the Israeli army saw our impressive order as a golden opportunity to freely rid themselves of their scraps. Mr Apananski added in explanation of the circumstances: "The price of the Russian anti-aircraft cannons ZU-23-2 in the contract was just the price of delivery, so they were basically free. After the public scandal broke, I met with Mr Rabin and convinced him that ordering new

In the meantime Mr Apananski was manoeuvring in the background, discreet and steady as always. In addition to the general national goal, i.e. the successful completion of the weapons transaction to improve Estonia's international reputation and create Estonian securities in the format of promissory notes, he of course also had certain personal interests. However, as professionals, we did not stick our noses in his wallet. At home, Mr Apananski seemed to have two significant interests, which he also repeatedly presented to the Prime Minister: the privatisation of international Viru Hotel, and some real estate left behind by the Russian army.<sup>48</sup> It is to be noted that my dismissed Deputy Minister had tried to deal with the same properties. Neither of them got what they wanted. However, Mr Apananski later claimed with some degree of satisfaction that with our weapons deal he earned "crazy profits, also in the material sense", but even more so in terms of international advertising. "The transaction boosted my reputation considerably. I made many profitable business agreements after it."<sup>49</sup>

The Israelis were professional in Helsinki and their attitude towards us was "interested, but restrained"<sup>50</sup> – they were friendly but stubborn.<sup>51</sup> At first, they hadn't even understood why their political leaders had ordered them to deal with us – after all, we were so far away, and moreover, we had been part of their former enemy, the Soviet Union. But step by step trust grew and the suspicions of the Israelis regarding the Estonian government were allayed.<sup>52</sup>

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cannons and delivering them to Estonia would be cheaper than getting smeared with the lies published by the Estonian media. He agreed. TAAS ordered 50 new cannons from Bulgaria and delivered them at its own cost." (E-mail from Apananski to the author of 22 July 2014.)

<sup>48</sup> E-mail from Pruuli to the author of 15 July 2014.

<sup>49</sup> Astrid Kannel, "Leonid Apananski teenis Iisraeli-Eesti relvatehingult tohutut kasu," /Leonid Apananski earns huge profits on Israeli-Estonia weapons deal/ (interview), *Sõnumileht*, 2.11.1995.

<sup>50</sup> E-mail from Apananski to the author of 22 July 2014.

<sup>51</sup> The Israeli delegation consisted of Vice President of Marketing for TAAS Razi Dotan, Vice President of TAAS to Northern Europe Zvi Urbach, Sales Manager Yoram Bar-am and our old acquaintance Attaché Melamed-Lemkow. They were all former officers of the Israeli armed forces.

<sup>52</sup> E-mail from Apananski to the author of 22 July 2014.

TAAS did not agree to sell us the US-made Stinger anti-aircraft missiles, as they were subject to an American resale ban. We would have been unable to afford them in any case. In the area of air defence, we had to settle for a couple of Strelas (which may have been privately procured in the meantime) and the 23-mm Sergeys,<sup>53</sup> which the Israelis had taken as trophies and which were very familiar to our men.

Thanks to Mr Manitski's successful negotiation spurt, we even managed to gain a few percent off the total price. Yes, the weapons ended up being more expensive than the familiar Chinese, Bulgarian and Romanian ones, but cheaper than the Western European, i.e. German, Belgian and British equivalents – meaning that the final price landed more or less at the same level as the US weapon prices. We had no choice anyway.

## Signing and what happened next

The contract for purchasing weapons between the Republic of Estonia and TAAS was approved after new and even tougher negotiations on the night of the 6th of January and signed in the White Hall in Toompea on the 7th of January 1993. I can see from my diary that I had a meeting with Foreign Minister Trivimi Velliste<sup>54</sup> at 5.00 p.m. the previous day. It is of course easy to reconstruct the topic of our conversation in retrospect. I would like to emphasise that this was also a completely new transaction for Israel – their first big business deal in a post-Soviet country using a credit system that was also new to them. This means that we, the new government of the poor Estonia, were trusted both politically and economically. This in itself must be seen an achievement.

Upon signing my name on the bulky contract, which consisted of seven parts, on the one hand I felt both pride and joy: look, we succeeded, we did it! On the other hand, I was somewhat alarmed by the mammoth amount for which I was to be responsible until 2000. Fortunately, the

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<sup>53</sup> Official name ZU-23-2.

<sup>54</sup> Diary 93. Of course, there is no mention of a document that was signed in this diary, kept by the secretary of the Ministry since 1993. It was top secret, after all.

Government Office was to be in charge of all future payments. There was no money for this in the budget of the Ministry of Defence. As always, signing such a significant contract was followed by a formal dinner, in this case with the Prime Minister and the Israeli delegation.<sup>55</sup>

As I have already mentioned, the contract was strictly classified. However, due to our negligence its content was quickly leaked, partly via Kuku Radio and partly via our Ministry of Foreign Affairs,<sup>56</sup> and the US newspaper the Philadelphia Inquirer. Its revealing article was followed by a stern diplomatic note from Russia to the United States, who sent an inquiry to Israel. The latter replied coldly that TAAS was an independent company and operated in its own business interests.<sup>57</sup> On the morning of the 9th of January 1993 Rein Lang's Kuku Radio spoke about negotiations "to purchase a large batch of weapons from Israel, intermediated by Leonid Apananski".<sup>58</sup> Yes, we were embarrassed. The attitude of TAAS towards us after this blunder was obviously 'reserved' for quite some time.<sup>59</sup>

On the 3rd of February we were still playing poker with the Estonian public about the weapons deal. We and the Prime Minister neither confirmed nor denied the allegations that Estonia was planning to buy weapons from Israel. I kept emphasising that we would of course buy them if they could be sold us and we could afford them.<sup>60</sup> However, two days later, on the 5th of February, the Government paid the first instalment of 5 million dollars to TAAS.

Reiterating the content and details of the contract and the almost hysterical attacks we were subjected to in Estonia seems pointless, and

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<sup>55</sup> Also e-mail from Pruuli to the author of 15 July 2014.

<sup>56</sup> Foreign Minister Trivimi Velliste of Pro Patria did not respond to any of the three queries I sent him. The nondescript response of his official Eerik-Niiles Kross in USA claiming that everything was already known in Washington has been preserved. (E-mail from Pruuli to the author of 15 July 2014).

<sup>57</sup> E-mail from Apananski to the author of 22 July 2014.

<sup>58</sup> E-mail from Pruuli to the author of 15 July 2014.

<sup>59</sup> E-mail from Apananski to the author of 22 July 2014.

<sup>60</sup> Aarne Mägi, "Eesti peab relvaostukõnelusi mitme riigiga," /Estonia in talks with several countries to buy weapons/ (interview), *Päevaleht*, 3.2.1993; Kalle Muuli, "Läbimurre Läände: Eestile 50 miljoni dollari eest Iisraeli relvi?" /Breakthrough to the West: 50 million dollars' worth of Israeli weapons for Estonia?/, *Postimees*, 4.2.1993.

responding to them so long *post festum* even less sensible.<sup>61</sup> But – boom! Suddenly, all over we had all these big, albeit unknown, security policy experts in both the Estonian media and the Riigikogu, crawling out of the woodwork with their vivid imaginations and ‘knowledge’. And we suddenly had all these exceptional specialists on international weaponry! But there were exceptions as well.<sup>62</sup> Sometimes we even received some support, but the cheering of our supporters was hardly heard amid such loud noise. This racket – irresponsible in regard to the state and its people, as well as *ad hominem* – lasted for weeks and occasionally even signalled a latent anti-Semitism.<sup>63</sup>

For quite some time, this politically-inspired reaction seriously interfered with our partnership with TAAS. It also jeopardized all promising cooperation opportunities with Israel in the future, and – it was all triggered by our own people.

Also, the Government Office of our poor state did not turn out to be the most reliable maker of payments.<sup>64</sup> As the signatory of the contract, I complained to the Prime Minister on the 7th of June 1993: “I see it as my duty to report that the payment orders from the Government Office

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<sup>61</sup> All records of the Riigikogu, newspapers and magazines from those days are available online and in libraries and archives.

<sup>62</sup> I am pleased to recall the expertise of Sulev Hallik (Sulev Hallik “Kaitseminister Hain Rebas: asi liigub, ja see on pinnuks silmas nn. endistele ja ringkondadele väljaspool Eestit,” / Defence Minister Hain Rebas: Things are moving and it’s a thorn in the side for the so-called ‘former’ and circles outside Estonia/ (interview), *Pühapäevaleht*, 6.3.1993), Juhan Paju (Juhan Paju, “Paar sõna kaitseministri kaitseks,” /A few words in defence of the Defence Minister/, *Lääne Elu* 2.3.1993), Peeter Tali (Peeter Tali, “Kaitseminister Hain Rebas: kaitsejõud vajavad intelligentseid inimesi” /Defence Minister Hain Rebas: Defence Forces need intelligent people/, *Postimees*, 2.3.1993), Mihkel (Michael) Tarm (Mihkel Tarm, “David prepares for Goliath. An interview with the new Estonian minister of defence, Hain Rebas,” *Talinn City Paper* Nr 6, Winter 1993) and Mihkel Tiks (Mihkel Tiks, “Kas Eesti suudab ennast kaitsta?” /Can Estonia defend itself?/ (interview), *Rahva Hääl* 23.7.1993 and 24.7.1993).

<sup>63</sup> In the style of George Orwell’s classic novel *1984* (1948), there were obvious attempts to stomp the Defence Minister (and others) into the ground and to turn him into a non-person. For example, the management of Estonian Television boycotted me from October 1992 to May 1993. They let people attack and revile me, but offered no chance to respond, to explain what was going on in Estonia’s national defence and what we were planning to do. At the time, I spoke more about Estonian national defence on Swedish, Finnish and German TV than on ETV.

<sup>64</sup> E-mail from Pruuli to the author of 15 July 2014.



to Israel are chronically late. This means that *ca* 1.8 million of taxpayers' money has already been spent on default interest to the bank that intermediates the payments. I am truly indignant, as I have pointed this out before. The fact that the payment due on 20 May was late by 17 days means that once again we 'gift' 897,164.79 kroons to the bank. Why? Whose fault is this? Who keeps squandering the money of the taxpayers of the Republic of Estonia?"<sup>65</sup> I received no response. And so Mr Apananski again had something to iron out in the bureau of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

It has been discussed and debated whether the government's maintaining silence and keeping the contract a secret actually gave the opposition ammunition?<sup>66</sup> Without a doubt, the storm of criticism and vilification of the contract – and those who signed it – still dominates in the Estonian media. Yes, it is easy to speculate, especially *post factum*. But secrecy was the non-negotiable preconditions of the contract. Without it, nothing would have worked. We can therefore affirm that by staying silent, the government suffered a loss at the tactical media level, but won (despite numerous obstacles) in long-term strategic terms. Namely, the weapons we ordered arrived and stayed.

## Moving on: spring/summer 1993

Despite the heated arguments around the contract, Prime Minister Mart Laar himself pushed its ratification through in the Riigikogu in spring 1993. I am personally grateful to him for doing so. There is no doubt that he was better at these verbal street fights than all of the expatriate Estonians who were in Tallinn at the time.

Our Estonian Air pilots flew the first set of weapons to Estonia on the 17th of May. It had to be done in secret, as it was against all international security rules. We were in a rush, and a bit scared as well. An ordinary passenger plane was used to conceal the transaction (it was

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<sup>65</sup> Original in the Prime Minister's archive, copies in the archives of the Ministry of Defence and the author. See also Raivo Palmaru, "Põhja-Eesti Panga saladused," /Secrets of the North-Estonian Bank/, *Eesti Sõnumid*, 30.8.1995, 1–2.

<sup>66</sup> Mart Laar, *Eesti uus algus* (Tallinn: Tänapäev, 2002), 160.

filled with weapons and ammunition!) and it arrived in Estonia following complicated and dangerous airways. This operation, which was diligently, if regrettably, made public by *Eesti Ekspress*, was also followed by an unpleasant exchange of diplomatic notes.<sup>67</sup> Then, on a nice summer evening, we organised a dinner for our brave pilots as a modest expression of our gratitude. I was also impressed by the inventiveness and flexibility of Mr Apananski in coming up with and organising this mode of transport.<sup>68</sup>

We showcased the new weapons to the Prime Minister and the press on the Aegviidu training range just a week later, on the 22th of May. It was a lovely early summer day. The Prime Minister's smile was as bright as the sun. The new weapons worked, everything was fine, the onlookers were excited. The Prime Minister held a mini-Uzi gently in his arms like it was a baby, and the somewhat reluctant Defence Minister too had to try a mini-Uzi. However, a terrible accident occurred at the end of the event – a cadet was killed because he and his chief had both been negligent. By this point I had already left the training field with the Prime Minister, but the incident certainly marred an otherwise successful day. A few weeks later, on the 10th of June, officers invited me to try the new Galil sniper rifles from 400 metres at a shooting range near Tallinn. They were very much OK.

Then, in his usual energetic manner, and on the invitation of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin of the 13th of June 1993, Mr Apananski organised the visit of one of our most impressive delegations to Israel in June 1993. I can see in my diary that I met with Mr Apananski at 2.00 p.m. on the 30th of June.<sup>69</sup> What else could we have talked about except Israel? Our delegation consisted of Prime Minister Laar, Minister of Economic Affairs Toomas Sildmäe, Ambassador Alar Olljum, the 'Special Assistant to the Foreign Minister in Relations to Israel' Leonid Apananski and Adviser to the Prime Minister Tiit Pruuli.

Pruuli wrote: "The role of Apananski in preparing the visit cannot be underestimated. He came to see us (i.e. in the Office of the Prime Minis-

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<sup>67</sup> E-mail from Apananski to the author of 22 July 2014.

<sup>68</sup> It is usual for people who invent and put together big business plans (so-called consultants) to earn good consultation fees.

<sup>69</sup> Diary 93.

ter. *Author*) several times to discuss which business people we could meet with [---]. He advised us to work with attorney Avi Pelossof, who communicated directly with the Head of Rabin's Bureau Haber [---]."<sup>70</sup> *Post festum*, Leonid Apananski rated Pruuli's inventiveness and agility equally highly.<sup>71</sup>

The programme prepared for the Estonian delegation was packed with meetings. The Estonian Prime Minister visited the President, the Prime Minister, the Chairman of the Knesset, the Foreign Minister and the Minister of Trade and Economic Affairs. The delegation also visited the Ministry of Defence and had a meeting with the management of TAAS. An agreement was made about the formation of a joint workgroup of the Ministries of Defence, which was obviously about the production of ammunition. Introducing new types of telephones to Estonia and building wind generators on the blustery coastline of Estonia were also discussed. And finally, a cultural contract was entered into and signed by the Prime Ministers.<sup>72</sup> Plans were made to invite the Estonian Defence Minister with a workgroup to Israel in August 1993 to launch the formation of an Estonian rapid reaction unit with the help of Israel – something our Defence Forces definitely needed.<sup>73</sup>

And what came of all this? In hindsight, we might seriously ask why this all went to waste – why did all these excellent plans come to nothing apart from the weapons transaction?

In early August 1993, having been disavowed three times by my superiors,<sup>74</sup> I resigned as Defence Minister in relation to the so-called Pullapää crisis. I am therefore not responsible for the subsequent phases<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> E-mail from Pruuli to the author of 15 July 2014.

<sup>71</sup> E-mail from Apananski to the author of 22 July 2014. Avi Pelossof was a family member of Yitzhak Rabin.

<sup>72</sup> E-mail from Pruuli to the author of 15 July 2014.

<sup>73</sup> When I sought to present this promising scheme to Acting Minister of the Interior Kaido Kama a few weeks after my resignation, he did not even bother to see me.

<sup>74</sup> By Prime Minister Mart Laar, Acting Prime Minister Trivimi Velliste and the Chairman of my own ERSP party Ants Erm, all in relation to the Pullapää crisis. See reference number 2.

<sup>75</sup> Regarding the weapons and their quality, see Toe Nõmm, "Eesti sõdurid ei pea oma varustust häbenema," /No need for Estonian soldiers to feel embarrassed about their equipment/ *Eesti Ekspress*, 9.11.2011.

and complications<sup>76</sup> of the weapons deal. Nor will I make any more comments about the related media battles. However, I was and I still am convinced that the first strikes in January and February 1993 against our nicely progressing cooperation with Israel emanated from three directions. Firstly, they came from the evident enemies of our state, the so-called ‘formers’ (former Communist bosses), who still missed the Soviet Union and the journalists and editors that were still loyal towards them. Secondly, some of our *über*-nationalists from another corner of the world loudly joined this destructive game, especially as they happened to carry their own weaponry company in their back pocket. As the third hostile group I would mention the mass of people who always jump on every bandwagon. Together they delivered a fatal blow against the cooperation between Estonia and Israel with their exceptionally loud anti-Israeli noise (‘Jewish guns’ etc.) when the so-called ‘trophy weapons’ arrived in spring 1994.<sup>77</sup> Of course, there were exceptions, decent and understanding reactions, but they hardly came through.

Our relationship with Israel was ended for good that spring by the defiant opposition of the Prime Minister and the new Commander of the Defence Forces, General Aleksander Einseln from the US. He had been against our relationship with TAAS from the very beginning. As he was leaving the Aegviidu training range after the showcasing of the TAAS weapons in May 1993, he provocatively declared that the American M14 (used in the Vietnam War) was the best infantry weapon.<sup>78</sup> The result was that after spring 1994 there were no further developments in relations between Estonia and Israel other than the already agreed upon weapons, payments and – court cases. However, foreign banks gradually began to

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<sup>76</sup> Experts were not surprised that such larger quantities of weapons and amounts of money led to friction, disagreements, mutual accusations and court cases. This is a tedious daily occurrence in the big world, which is why international arbitration tribunals have been established.

<sup>77</sup> See the brief and constructive explanation given by Colonel Laaneots, reference number 47. Apananski: “Some may think that getting 50 new anti-aircraft cannons to Estonia was a massive victory for us, but the end of the development of any further business relationships between us was the result of Estonia’s arrogance and impudence (to put it mildly).” (E-mail of Apananski to the author of 22 July 2014.)

<sup>78</sup> E-mail from Apananski to the author of 22 July 2014.

finance Estonian private businesses and open lines of credit, incl. for the companies belonging to Mr Apananski.<sup>79</sup>

## Summary

Yes, Estonian politicians failed to turn the support of Israel into an internationally transparent opportunity. Because of the counteractions of ‘homespun and inexperienced, often petty and rivalling men’, we did not manage to develop the planned wide-ranging contacts with Israel.<sup>80</sup> I had no doubts then and I am still convinced that our eastern neighbour was constantly meddling and interfering in every way possible.<sup>81</sup>

Still, our Israel arms deal allowed us to fully equip a light infantry division and make a security policy breakthrough to the West. Namely, people in Western capitals now began taking us more seriously and gradually started to sell, lease and even donate weapons to us.<sup>82</sup> We certainly built a strong foundation for the development of our Defence Forces with the Israeli weapons deal. The state’s security, defence capacity and

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<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> E-mail from journalist Marica Lillemets to the author of 4 July 2014.

<sup>81</sup> In spring 1993 the Head of the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs Olav Fageland Knudsen spoke about 60 officials in the headquarters of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) whose main task was to keep an eye on the Baltics. We can only guess how many thousands of agents this successor of the KGB dispatched to the Baltics and how many hundreds of them were active in Estonia and Tallinn. On the 13th of March 1993 Stockholm’s *Dagens Nyheter* quoted the chief of information of the SVR Juri Kobaladze, who allegedly said that “we’re very interested in what’s going on in the Baltics”. See Hain Rebas, “Vad väntar sig de baltiska staterna av Europa?” *Kungl. Krigsvetenskapsakademiens handlingar och tidskrift = The Royal Swedish Academy of War Sciences proceedings and journal* 4 (1994): 70, 57–72. E-mail from Laaneots to the author of 29 June 2014: “[---] I informed the Security Policy about these signals as well. There were probably enough such people in the Riigikogu and the political parties, and the propaganda that we didn’t need national defence and the witch-hunt against you as someone who had come from the West were also related to the activities of the special services of our ‘friendly neighbour’”

<sup>82</sup> Then Prime Minister Mart Laar also writes: “[---] it was a real breakthrough that opened up opportunities to procure weaponry from the West for Estonia and also for the other Baltic States.” [Laar, *Eesti uus algus*, 160.]

the people's will to defend their country all increased. Perhaps, as Prime Minister Mart Laar claims, it also hastened the withdrawal of Russian troops from Estonia.<sup>83</sup> In any case, the transaction led to the recognition of Estonia in the world of finance and was an important stage in the developing relationships of Estonia and NATO.

The transaction would never have succeeded without Leonid Apananski's efficient and inventive bridge-building with Israel, without the weapons expertise of Colonel Laaneots, without the strong backing of Prime Minister Mart Laar and without a decisive Defence Minister. We should also note that neither the Latvians nor the Lithuanians managed a breakthrough transaction like this. But we did! And let us not forget the patrons of our brave joint venture, President Lennart Meri and Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Moreover, the fact that the contract was professionally prepared in both economic and legal terms – in large measure due to the expertise of Jaan Manitski – was confirmed by a London Court of International Arbitration ruling in 2003. It resolved a long dispute between the parties and the Republic of Estonia won back 1.75 million dollars.

Finally, I am obliged to conclude that the Israeli/TAAS weapons that we procured in the face of a loud public outcry have served our men well, both at home and on foreign missions. Jüri Pihl, Director General of the Security Police at the time, wrote (2014): “The purchase of weapons from Israel was a new beginning for our Defence Forces, the Estonian Border Guard and the police.”<sup>84</sup> General Laaneots summarises (2014) the events concisely and briefly, as befits a military man: “[---] The purchase was necessary, it gave the Defence Forces all the essential weapons and equipment they needed and allowed them to progress in their development.”<sup>85</sup>

Shortly after our weapons deal the first representatives of the NATO Political Committee and its generals, led by AFNORTH Sir Garry Johnson, arrived in Tallinn, on the 25th of June and on the 12th of July, respec-

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<sup>83</sup> Laar, *Eesti uus algus*, 160.

<sup>84</sup> E-mail from Pihl to the author of 13 August 2014.

<sup>85</sup> E-mail from Laaneots to the author of 29 June 2014.

tively.<sup>86</sup> There is no doubt about it that our so-called Israeli weapons deal remains one of the most significant security policy successes in the history of the restored Republic of Estonia.

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<sup>86</sup> The first to visit us from 12–14 July was British General Sir Garry Johnson, Commander-in-Chief of NATO AFNORTH or the Allied Forces Northern Europe, whom I had invited to visit us from his headquarters in Kolsås near Oslo. Of course, we also discussed our Israeli weapons deal. See more: Hain Rebas, “Accidental or Deliberate Failure? The Story of Estonia’s Defence Concept of 1993”, see this yearbook p. 217 ff.

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