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# **Bank Shot:**

## **Swiss Banks and Swiss National Character in Daniel Silva's Mossad Spy Novel *The English Assassin***

*by Brian Champion*

*"But do me one small favor."*

*"What's that, Otto?"*

*His pale hand patted the top of the table until it came  
to rest on the note.*

*"Burn this damned thing, along with everything else.*

*Make sure no one else stumbles on any  
unpleasant reminders of the past. This is  
Switzerland. There is no past."*<sup>1</sup>

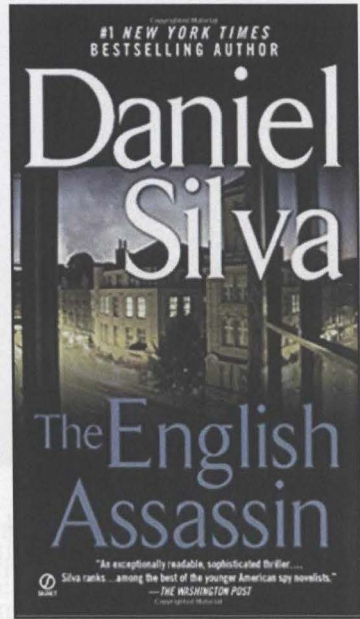
**T**he American novelist Daniel Silva examines Switzerland, Swiss banks and the Swiss national character in his Israeli spy novel, *The English Assassin*, because the state of Israel, and by extension, all Jews, face a perpetual existential threat. A major force in the international thriller literature, Silva has written seventeen novels using Gabriel Allon, an assassin for Israel's civilian intelligence service called Mossad, as a microscope through which various dimensions of Israel's existential threat are examined.

In *The English Assassin*, the second of the seventeen, Silva substantiates this on-guard world-view through three separate yet unifying perspectives. The first dimension is that of victim or proxy

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<sup>1</sup> *The English Assassin* (New York: GP Putnam's and Sons, 2002), 7.

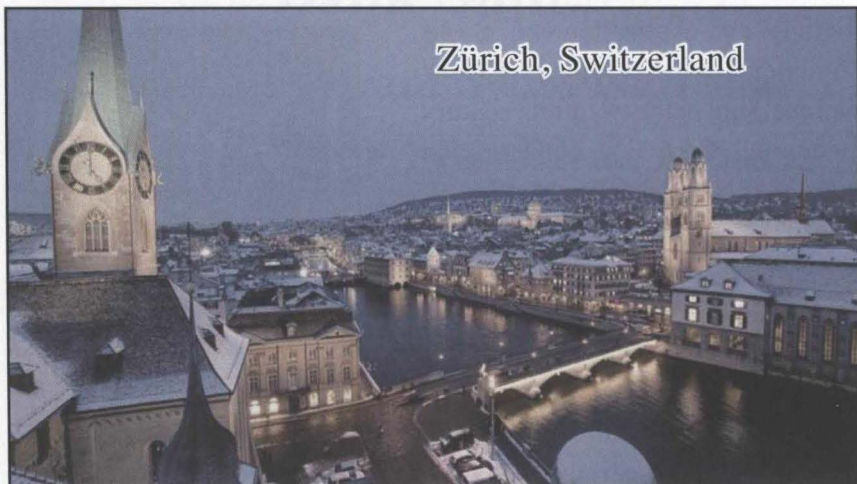
victim, an explication of Swiss complicity in the shaping of Israel's national soul in the twentieth century stemming from its collaboration with the Nazis in World War II. The second occurs in two parts: an exploration of Swiss banking or bankers, and then an assessment of Swiss banking's nondescript imprint manifested in selected examples of Swiss culture. The third perspective is that of the instrumentality of Swiss fixtures, such as the financial sector, in twentieth century history, and its instrumentality in advancing Israel's own geopolitical survival. The article's conclusion will then entwine these three strands into a cohesive understanding of Silva's portrait of Mossad as Israel's protector.



This article is a unique dilation on Swiss historico-contemporaneous behavior because while individual Swiss who appear in this novel appear as themselves, of course, and the novel includes Swiss commercial, law enforcement officials and security bureaucrats, each also appears as broader socio-political typologies of Swiss national character. Understanding a few notable Swiss archetypes, it is argued, promotes broader comprehension or appreciation of Swiss domestic and international roles, and Israeli instrumentalization of selected Swiss institutions.

### The Setting

The novel revolves around the career of a classically-trained art restorer, Gabriel Allon, who in 1972 was recruited out of art school by the head of Mossad to be part of the decapitation team that hunted and liquidated the perpetrators of the Munich Olympics massacre which



killed eleven Israeli athletes or coaches. He was selected because of his broad and deep familiarity with European art history and culture, and because his fluency in four major European languages which clearly could lubricate his operational efficiency. Allon is used by Mossad as a weapon with which to wage covert war against those sworn to eliminate or harm Israel, and while the Olympics revenge mission concludes, Allon is a recurring character in the other volumes.

In *The English Assassin*, Allon is dispatched to Zurich to clean an Old Masters painting in the art collection of secretive August Rolfe, a wealthy financier who lives in a big and secretive villa on the stately Zurichberg, and who has directed that that painting, valued in millions of dollars, be given to the state of Israel as part of his estate. However, upon arrival at Rolfe's villa, Allon finds his client murdered, for which Allon is arrested. No spy agency likes to have its spies in police custody and Mossad officials, through reliance on Israeli diplomats and the foreign affairs ministry, ultimately liberate Allon. Part of the release agreement is a promise from the Israeli government that Allon would never again set foot upon Swiss soil, but upon discovery that the client who originally brought him to Switzerland once laundered money and other assets for the Nazis, he plays a dicey game of chicken with Swiss authorities in order to seek justice for Holocaust victims and their descendants. Tracking the war booty and determining Rolfe's

war crimes is motivation enough for Allon, as he seeks justice for his people, both living and dead. But in the process, Silva through Allon, lays Swiss culture, including its furtive banks and well-camouflaged financial transactions, under his literary microscope.

### Viewing Swiss Culture as Victim

One of Silva's objectives is to educate on Swiss behavior during Hitlerite Germany. He introduces an expatriate, Professor Emil Jacobi, who concisely yet polemically recounts his research and his need to leave Switzerland, and who functions as the provider of the Nazi backstory.

He wore a frayed tweed jacket, and his rimless spectacles were pushed up into his bird's nest of unruly gray hair. There were clips on the legs of his trousers to keep the cuffs from becoming entangled in the chain of his bicycle. 'Welcome to exile,' he said, leading Gabriel wearily up the staircase to his flat on the fourth floor. 'We Swiss revere the right to free speech, but only if that speech refrains from criticism of Switzerland. I committed the mortal sin of a good Swiss, and so I find myself here, in the gilded cage of Lyons.'<sup>2</sup>

Then additionally, he narrates the trajectory of his research into Swiss national nightmares, and in the process, Silva situates Jacobi as one of the major interpreters of modern Swiss culture—adversarial, yes, but not seditiously so.

Professor Emil Jacobi was the self-appointed guilty consciences of Switzerland. He believed that in order to save his country he first had to tear it down, and he devoted his life to unearthing and exposing the unsavory elements of Swiss history. His explosive book, *The Myth [sic]*, had ignited a firestorm by detailing the extensive economic and trade links between Nazi Germany and Switzerland throughout the Second

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.



World War. Jacobi outlined the process by which Swiss banks accepted looted gold—and gold ripped from the teeth of Jews on the way to gas chambers—and converted it into hard currency Hitler used to buy the raw materials needed to keep his war machine running. Professor Jacobi's conclusion shocked the country and made him a national pariah: Switzerland and Nazi Germany were allies in everything but name, he wrote. Hitler could not have waged war without the help of Swiss bankers and arms makers. If not for Switzerland, the Wehrmacht would have ground to a halt in the autumn of 1944. Millions of lives would have been saved but for the greed of Swiss bankers. Soon after the publication of *The Myth [sic]*, life for Professor Jacobi in Switzerland became increasingly uncomfortable. He received death threats, his telephones were tapped, and officers of the Swiss security service monitored his movements. Fearing for his safety, he resigned his professorship in Lausanne and accepted a position in the history department of the University of Lyons. It took Gabriel the better part of the next day to track him down.<sup>3</sup>

Allon then pointedly asks Jacobi about alleged Swiss bank complicity.

'Tell me about the Swiss connection.'  
'Neutrality left the [art] dealers and collectors of Switzerland in a unique position to capitalize on the rape of Paris. The Swiss were permitted to travel throughout much of Europe, and the Swiss franc was the world's only universally accepted currency. And don't forget that places like Zurich were awash in the profits of collaborating with Hitler. Paris was the place to buy looted art, but Zurich, Lucerne, and Geneva were the places to unload it.' 'Or stash it?' 'But of course. The banking secrecy laws made Switzerland a natural dumping ground for looted art. So did the laws covering the receipt of stolen property.' 'Explain the laws to me.'

‘They were brilliant, and thoroughly Swiss in subtly. For example, if a person takes possession of an object in good faith, and that object happens to be stolen, it’s rightfully his after five years.’ ‘How convenient.’ ‘Wait, there’s more. If an art dealer finds himself in possession of a stolen work, it’s the responsibility of the true owner to reimburse the dealer in order to reclaim his painting.’ ‘So Swiss dealers and collectors could receive stolen works without any fear of the law or of losing money?’ ‘Exactly.’<sup>4</sup>

The professor took a brief break, to retrieve some additional information, and then resumes his recap of Swiss history and personalizes August Rolfe’s role in it:

The professor slipped on his glasses and opened the file. ‘There are very many small private banks in Zurich, and there are extremely large ones. The giants like Union Bank of Switzerland and the Credit Suisse both have private banking divisions, though they handle only very wealthy customers.’ ‘How large?’ ‘Usually, a minimum deposit of about five million dollars. It’s been reported that the intelligence agencies of your country utilized the private banking services of Credit Suisse.’ The professor glanced over the open file. ‘But then, I’m sure you know nothing of that.’ Gabriel let the question sail by. ‘From what I know of Augustus Rolfe, he fell into the first category.’ ‘That’s right. The Rolfe bank was a small-enterprise—Rolfe and a half-dozen employees, if that. If you wanted someone to hide your money or your belongings in Switzerland, Augustus Rolfe was your best friend. He was one of the most discreet and most influential bankers in Zurich. He had very powerful friends. That’s what makes his murder so baffling to me.’ ‘What else do you know about him?’ ‘He took over control of the family business from his father in the early thirties—not a good time for the banks of Switzerland. There was a worldwide depression, the German panic, a currency crisis in Austria that

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 157-158, italics in original.



was sending shockwaves through Zurich. Swiss banks were falling like dominoes. Many private banks were forced to merge with larger competitors to survive. Rolfe managed to hang on by his fingernails.’ Jacobi licked the tips of his fingers and turned a page. ‘Then Hitler comes to power in Germany and starts making trouble for the Jews. Jewish money and valuables flow into the private banks of Zurich—including Rolfe’s.’ ‘You know this to be fact?’ ‘Absolutely. Augustus Rolfe opened more than 200 numbered accounts for German Jews.’ Jacobi turned over a few pages of the file. ‘Here’s where the facts end and the rumors begin. In the late thirties, agents of the Gestapo start coming to Zurich. They’re looking for all the Jewish money that’s been spirited out of Germany and deposited in Swiss banks. It’s rumored that Rolfe cooperated with the Gestapo agents in violation of Swiss banking laws and revealed the existence of Jewish-held numbered accounts at his bank.’ ‘Why would he do that?’ ‘Would you like my theory?’ ‘Sure.’ ‘Because he knew that the money deposited by a few Jews was nothing compared to the riches that awaited him if he cooperated with Nazi Germany.’ ‘Is there evidence to suggest that he did?’ ‘Indeed,’ Jacobi said, his eyebrows shooting up over the rims of his spectacles. ‘It’s a fact that Augustus



Rolfe made frequent visits to Nazi Germany throughout the war.’ ‘Who did he see there?’ ‘It’s not known, but his travels raised enough eyebrows that Rolfe came under investigation after the war.’ ‘What came of it?’ ‘Absolutely nothing. Rolfe melted back into the world of Zurich banking, never to be heard from again—until a week ago, of course, when someone walked into his villa on the Zurichberg and put a bullet in his head.’<sup>5</sup>

Silva’s literary flourish builds on the academic and journalistic research that documents Swiss banking behaviors during the war.<sup>6</sup> In these passages, as an Israeli Jew, Allon is hearing the Nazi victims’ case against Swiss institutions, and reinforces that perspective through the character called Jonathan.

Silva takes this Hitlerian plundering one step further when he interjects a temporary character, Jonathan, into the story. Jonathan is

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Philippe Braillard, *Switzerland and the Crisis of Dormant Assets and Nazi Gold* (London: Kegan and Paul, 2000); Stuart E Eizenstat, et al, *US and Allied Efforts to Recover and Restore Gold and Other Assets Stolen or Hidden by Germany During World War II: Preliminary Study* (Washington, DC: US Department of State, May 1997); or Jean Ziegler, *The Swiss, the Gold, and the Dead* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1998).

Some of this may not be ancient history. The online news source *Daily Beast* reported this on 29 January 2018 in article by Nico Hines entitled “Trump Tower Russian Lawyer, Natalia Veselnitskaya, Exposed in Swiss Corruption Case”: “The interest of Veselnitskaya and the Russian prosecutor general’s office is likely to be linked back to a \$230 million tax fraud that was uncovered by Sergei Magnitsky, a lawyer who worked for [American] Bill Browder, whose Hermitage Capital had major investments in Russia. After discovering the massive financial crime that could be linked back to the Russian government, Magnitsky was arrested, beaten, and allowed to die in a Russian jail cell. A series of laws in Magnitsky’s name have been enacted all over the world, imposing sanctions on Russians accused of corruption or complicity in the death of Magnitsky and the subsequent cover-up. President Barack Obama signed the US Magnitsky Act in 2012. A large portion of these stolen funds are believed to have made their way into the Swiss banking sector, sparking investigations by Swiss authorities, including the federal police and the Swiss prosecutor’s office... Alexander Perepilichiny, a Russian businessman living near London, had tipped off Magnitsky about the role played by Switzerland in the international scam. A few weeks before he was due to give evidence at a hearing in Lausanne, he died suddenly while he was out running.” See <https://www.thedailybeast.com/trump-tower-russian-lawyer-natalia-veselnitskaya-exposed-in-swiss-corruption-case?ref=home>

an Israeli who has joined Allon's covert team to effect one particular aspect of Allon's mission—to kill the assassin trying to eliminate August Rolfe's daughter. He portrays Jonathan as a rather dark character, and describes how the playing of Mozart in the briefing session—to foil any attempts at covert eavesdropping—only blackens Jonathan's disposition. Silva then uses such a dismal situation to land another punch on the face of Swiss banks on behalf of all Jewish victims.

To cover the sound of his instructions, he played a recording of German dances by Mozart. This seemed to darken Jonathan's mood. He reviled all things German. Indeed, the only people he hated more than the Germans were the Swiss. During the war, his grandfather had tried to preserve his money and heirlooms by entrusting them to a Swiss banker. Fifty years later, Jonathan tried to gain access to the account but was told by an officious clerk that the bank first required proof that Jonathan's grandfather was indeed dead. Jonathan explained that his grandfather had been murdered at Treblinka—with gas manufactured by a Swiss chemical company, he was tempted to say—and the Nazis, while sticklers for paperwork, had not been thoughtful enough to provide a death certificate. Sorry, the clerk had said. No death certificate, no money.<sup>7</sup>

To knit these events and attitudes together, Silva then has Jacobi provide a glimpse of the Swiss financial world. There is also foreshadowing here.

Jacobi closed the door and hung his saddlebag over the latch. 'So you wish to discuss the murder of Augustus Rolfe? As it turns out, I've been following that case quite carefully.' 'I thought you might. I was wondering if we could compare notes.' 'Are you an historian as well, Mr Allon?' 'Actually, I'm an art restorer, but in this matter I'm working for the government of Israel.' 'Well, this promises to be an

interesting evening. Clear the things off that chair and sit down. I'll see to the coffee.' ... Professor Jacobi spent several minutes digging through his towering stacks of paper for the file on Augustus Rolfe. It was very slender. 'Herr Rolfe was a private banker in the purest sense of the word, Mr Allon. I'm afraid much of what I'm going to tell you is based on conjecture and rumor.' 'I've often found that one can learn a great deal about a man by the rumors that swirl around him.' 'When one is dealing with a Swiss banker, especially a private banker like Augustus Rolfe, rumor is sometimes the best one can hope for.'<sup>8</sup>

There is no empirical method by which one may establish whether many Israelis feel as Jonathan, a smoldering hostility to Switzerland. But clearly, Silva's intent is to introduce notions of Swiss responsibility for its actions during the persecutions of European Jewry, and Silva conveys that this pervasive victimhood is a foundational pillar of Israeli foreign relations, and a bedrock of its declaration of independence.

## Swiss Banks and Bankers

Having established the predicate for Israeli victimization, Silva turns his attention to the national financial institutions, and selected representatives. From Allon's arrival, he senses something different in Switzerland.

In the [Paris] Gare de l'Est, he boarded a night train to Zurich, and by nine o'clock the next morning he was strolling down the gentle sweep of Bahnhofstrasse. How gracefully Zurich conceals her riches, he thought. Much of the world's gold and silver lay in the bank vaults beneath his feet, but there were no hideous office towers to mark the boundaries of the financial district and no monuments to moneymaking. Just understatement,

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 164-165.



*A safe in a Swiss bank.*

discretion, and deception. A scorned woman who looks away to hide her shame. Switzerland.<sup>9</sup>

This trifecta of understatement, discretion and deception is additionally illustrated in a banker's comment about the global role of Swiss banks, and comes from Otto Gessler, an aging Swiss mercantilist and tycoon. One of the Mossad researchers working for Allon found an interesting anecdote that typifies Gessler's, and by extension, other Swiss merchants', business acumen.

Several years after the war, Gessler, acquired a company which had manufactured arms for the Wehrmacht. In a warehouse outside Lucerne, he had discovered five thousand artillery pieces that had been stranded in Switzerland after the collapse of the Third Reich. Unwilling to allow unsold inventory to remain on his books, Gessler went in search of a buyer. He found one in a rebellious corner of Asia. The Nazi artillery pieces helped topple a colonial ruler, and Gessler earned

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 18.

twice the profit the guns would have fetched in Berlin. As the sun rose over the row of cypress trees bordering the garden, [Mossad researcher Eli] Lavon unearthed one redeeming trait about Otto Gessler. It was suspected that each year Gessler gave millions of dollars to fund medical research. ‘Which disease?’ asked Gabriel. ‘Greed?’ suggested Oded, but Lavon shook his head in wonder. ‘It doesn’t say. The old bastard gives away millions a year, and he conceals even that.’<sup>10</sup>

To substantiate this point, Silva provides this characterization of the banks, and reflects what he perceives as actual Swiss reverence for such institutions:

Halfway between the Hauptbahnhoff and Zurichsee is the epicenter of Swiss banking, the Paradeplatz. The twin headquarters of Credit Suisse and the Union Bank of Switzerland glare at each other like prizefighters over the broad expanse of gray brick. They are the two giants of Swiss banking and among the most powerful in the world. In their shadow, up and down the length of Bahnhofstrasse, are other big banks and influential financial institutions, their locations clearly marked by bright signs and polished glass doors. But scattered in the quiet side streets and alleys between the Bahnhofstrasse and the Sihl River are the banks few people notice. They are the private chapels of Swiss banking, places where men can worship or confess their sins in absolute secrecy. Swiss law forbids these banks from soliciting deposits. They are free to call themselves banks if they wish, but they are not required to do so. Difficult to locate, easy to miss, they are tucked inside modern office blocks or in the rooms of centuries-old townhouses. Some employ several dozen workers; some only a handful. They are private banks in every sense of the word.<sup>11</sup>

There is a rationale for Swiss banks, formulated, articulated and defended by Swiss bankers themselves:

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 332-333.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 223-224.



Our detractors say that the drug trade has been very good to Switzerland. I'm afraid I would have to concur. I'm certain my own bank contains accounts for the so-called drug kingpins. But what is the harm? At least if the money is deposited in Switzerland it is put to good use. It is loaned to legitimate enterprises that produce goods and services and employment for millions of people.' 'So they can go out and buy more drugs?' 'If that's what they wish. You see, there is a circular quality to life on earth. Nature is in harmony. So is the global financial system. But just as nature can be thrown out of balance by seemingly small occurrence, so can business. Imagine the destructive consequences if the profits of the drug trade were not recirculated back into the world economy. The bankers of Switzerland are performing a valuable service.'<sup>12</sup>

Silva attempts to achieve additional context balance by creating two Swiss characters who figure largely in the novel's resolution. One is Otto Gessler, the aforementioned xenophobic banker who convenes a covert quorum of self-appointed protectors of the Swiss state, and the other is Gerhart Petersen, an officer in the Swiss security service. Silva uses a dialogue between Gessler and Allon to explicate on Swiss fiscal prudishness:

'Mr Allon, no one is ever going to find out what's in this room. We Swiss take our privacy rights very seriously. No one will ever be able to open these doors without my consent. But just to make certain of that fact, I've taken an additional step. Using a little known loophole in Swiss law, I declared this entire property a private bank. These rooms are part of the bank—vaults, if you will. The property contained in them is therefore covered by the banking secrecy laws of Switzerland, and under no circumstance can I ever be forced to open them or reveal their contents.' 'And this pleases you?' 'Indeed,' he said without reservation. 'Even if I was forced to open these rooms, I could be prosecuted

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 64-65.

for no wrongdoing. You see, each of these objects was acquired legally under Swiss law, and morally under the laws of God and nature. Even if someone could prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that a work in my collection had been stolen from their ancestor by the Germans, they would have to reimburse me at fair market value. Obviously, the cost of repatriation would be astonishing. You and your friends in Tel Aviv can screech as much as you like, but I will never be forced to open the steel doors that lead to these rooms.’ ‘You’re a son of a bitch, Gessler.’ ‘Ah, now you resort to curses and foul language. You blame the Swiss for this situation, but we are not to blame. The Germans started the war. We had the good sense to stay on the sidelines, and for this you wish to punish us.’ ‘You didn’t sit on the sidelines. You collaborated with Adolf Hitler! You gave him guns and you gave him money. You were his servants. You’re all just servants.’ ‘Yes, we did reap a financial reward for our neutrality, but why do you raise this now? After the war, we settled with the Allies and all was forgiven, because the West needed our money to help rebuild Europe. Then came the Cold War, and the West needed us again. Now, the Cold War is over, and everyone from both sides of the Iron Curtain is beating down the Swiss door with the cap in hand. Everyone wants an apology. Everyone wants money. But someday you’re going to need us again. It’s always been that way. The German princes and the French kings, the Arab sheiks and the American tax evaders, the drug lords and the arms merchants. My God, even your intelligence agency utilizes our services when it needs them. You yourself have been a frequent client of Credit Suisse over the years. So please, Mr Allon—please climb down off your moral high horse for a moment and be reasonable.’ ‘You’re a thief, Gessler. A common criminal.’ ‘A *thief* [italics in original]? No, Mr Allon, I’ve stolen nothing. I’ve acquired through smart business tactics a magnificent private collection of art along with staggering personal wealth. But I am not a thief. And what about you and your people? You bleat about the supposed crimes of

the Swiss, but you founded your state on land stolen from others. Paintings, furniture, jewelry—these are just objects, which are easily replaced. Land, however, is an entirely different matter. Land is forever. No, Mr Allon, I'm not a thief. I'm a winner, just like you and your people.'<sup>13</sup>

Gessler here uses Swiss banking's durability as one of its great redeeming characteristics, and Silva acknowledges as much when he has Israeli spy master Ari Shamron tell Allon that funding for his secret Mossad mission is already in place—in Switzerland. From the first novel in the series, the Israeli utilitarian Shamron says, "You have your money—five hundred thousand American. Usual account in Geneva", as if it was no big deal for the Israelis to use Swiss banks, but others couldn't.<sup>14</sup> Regardless, it clearly suits Silva's purpose in this novel to establish that Swiss banks are secretive; in a later novel he provides this assessment of Swiss bankers:

Herr Konrad Becker, of Becker & Puhl, Talstrasse 26, Zurich, arrived in Vienna that same morning. He cleared passport control with no delay and made his way to the arrivals hall, where he located the uniformed driver clutching a cardboard sign that read HERR BAUR [*sic*]. The client insisted on the added precaution. Becker did not like the client—nor was he under any illusions about the source of the account—but such was the nature of private Swiss banking and Herr Konrad Becker was a true believer. If capitalism were a religion, Becker would be a leader of an extremist sect. In Becker's learned opinion, man possessed the divine right to make money unfettered by government regulation and to conceal it wherever and however he pleased. Avoidance of taxation was not a choice but a moral duty. Inside the secretive world of Zurich banking, he was known for absolute discretion. It was the reason Konrad Becker had been entrusted with the account in the first place.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 350-351.

<sup>14</sup> *Kill Artist* (New York: Random House, 2000), 99.

<sup>15</sup> *Death in Vienna* (New York: GP Putnam's and Sons, 2004), 118-119.



## Secrecy as a National Trait

Silva concretizes the notion that to be Swiss is to be secretive. In response to Allon's question about Anna Rolfe's father, Silva's response has Anna defensively respond: "My father was a banker, Mr Allon. A Swiss banker. There were many things about his life, personal and professional, that he did not share with me."<sup>16</sup> In addition, Allon team member Eli Lavon comments on Otto Gessler's proclivity for opacity: "Otto Gessler is a secret. Otto Gessler is Switzerland incarnate."<sup>17</sup>

Private. Secret. For Silva, it's what Swiss do.

Or have done. Silva provides unique inflection of his assessment of Swiss banking with two examples of the same thing: the ancient creation of Zurich as Swiss banking's epicenter. To properly orient the reader on the context of cryptic transactions, Silva takes the reader back to the thirteenth century and the establishment of the Swiss state.

On the shores of Lake Lucerne ... is the legendary birthplace of the Swiss Confederation. In 1291, the leaders of the three so-called Forest Cantons—Uri, Schwyz, and Unterwalden—are said to have gathered in the Rutli Meadow and formed a defensive alliance against anyone who 'may plot evil against their persons or goods.' The event is sacred to

<sup>16</sup> *English Assassin*, 91-92. Italics in original.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 332-333.

Swiss. A mural of the Rutli Meadow adorns the wall of the Swiss National Council chamber, and each August the meeting on the meadow is remembered with a national day of celebration. Seven hundred years later, a similar defensive alliance was formed by a group of the country's richest and most powerful private bankers and industrialists. In 1291, the enemy had been the outsider: the Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf I of the Hapsburg dynasty, who was trying to assert his feudal rights in Switzerland. Today, once again, the enemies were outsiders but now they were scattered and more numerous. They were the Jews who were trying to pry open the bank vaults of Switzerland to look for money and whatever else they could lay their hands on. They were governments demanding that Switzerland pay billions of dollars for accepting Nazi gold during the Second World War. And the journalists and historians who were trying to paint the Swiss as willing allies of Germany—Hitler's money men and arms suppliers who prolonged the war at the cost of millions of lives. And the reformers inside Switzerland who were demanding an end to the sacred laws of banking secrecy. This new alliance took its inspiration from the fiercely independent forest dwellers who had gathered along Lake Lucerne in 1291. Like their ancestors, they swore to fight anyone who 'may plot evil against their persons or goods'. They saw the events raging beyond their Alpine Redoubt as a gathering storm that could wipe away the institutions that had given Switzerland, a tiny, landlocked country with few natural resources, the second-highest standard of living in the world.<sup>18</sup>

In Allon's meeting with Professor Jacobi, Allon discloses his frustration with his investigation into the Rolfe murder. Despite ambitious efforts, nothing gels for Allon as he meagerly acquires disparate facts about Rolfe and his place in the constellation of Swiss banking. Jacobi offers some mild comfort, and in the process, Silva helps unpack his own interpretation of Swiss national secrecy.

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 249-250.



‘It sounds as though you’ve run up against the great conspiracy of silence.’ ‘What do you mean by that?’ ‘When you’re dealing with Switzerland, Mr Allon, it’s best to keep one thing in mind. Switzerland is not a real country. It’s a business, and it’s run like a business. It’s a business that is constantly in a defensive posture. It’s been that way for seven hundred years.’ ‘What does that have to do with Rolfe’s murder?’ ‘There are people in Switzerland who stand to lose a great deal if the sins of the past are exposed and the sewers of the Bahnhofstrasse were given the thorough flushing they so desperately need. These people are an invisible government, and are not to be taken lightly, which is why I live here instead of Lausanne. If you choose to pursue this matter, I suggest you watch your back.’ Ten minutes later Gabriel was walking down the stairs with his copy of *The Myth* [*sic*] tucked beneath his arm. He paused in the foyer for a moment to open the cover and read the words the professor had scrawled on the title page. *Beware the gnomes of Zurich—Emil Jacobi* [*sic*].<sup>19</sup>

Beware, indeed, for on the very next page, an assassin hired by members of the Zurich banking community—whom Silva describes as “Jacobi’s mortal enemies, the financial oligarchy of Zurich.”<sup>20</sup>—have Jacobi eliminated outside his home in Lyons.

Gessler and Petersen, with a few others, meet to conspire in Switzerland’s salvation and preservation. For them, the contemporary threats are equal to or greater than those faced by their thirteenth century ancestors:

Petersen was the last to arrive. The others were already there. They had come from Zurich and Zug, from Lucerne and Bern, and from Geneva and Basel. As was their custom, they had traveled separately and arrived at unevenly spaced intervals so as not to attract attention. They were all Swiss. Foreigners were

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

not permitted. Foreigners were the reason the group existed.”<sup>21</sup>

This second theme, that of cultural contamination by non-Swiss, reverberates at the novel’s climax. A member of Gessler’s household staff tries to explain to Allon, and by extension, to the reader, Swiss exasperation at the scrutiny such a small and quiet country receives.

‘I work for Otto Gessler because I’m sick of watching my country being dragged through the mud by a bunch of damned foreigners over something that happened before I was born.’ ‘Your country turned looted Nazi gold into hard currency. It turned the dental gold and wedding rings of the Jewish people into hard currency. Thousands of terrified Jews placed their life savings in your banks on the way to the death chambers of Auschwitz and Sobibor, and then those same banks kept the money instead of handing it over to their rightful heirs.’ ‘What does this have to do with me? Sixty years! This happened sixty years ago. Why can’t we move on from this? Why must you turn my country into an international pariah over the actions of a few greedy bankers six decades ago?’ ‘Because you have to admit wrongdoing. And then you have to make amends.’<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

What is Silva’s point in profiling Swiss culture in *The English Assassin*? He clearly wishes to link multigenerational Jewish victimhood with Swiss complicity with the Nazis. Simultaneously, while he wishes to have Switzerland acknowledge its role in the Nazi secretion of stolen Jewish assets, this desire also exposes a complex element of Swiss nationalism: secrecy is essential to a Swiss comprehension of Swiss-ness. That this cultural penchant for indistinction is a major pillar of Swiss nationalism is manifested in the lengths and breadths of its covert banking and financial industries.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 317.

Secondly, and as previously illustrated, Silva interprets one of Zurich's efficient and anonymous private bankers in a religious metaphor, the secretness itself a sacred national article of banking faith. For Silva, the ways and methods of enigmatic Swiss banking are foundational for his story-telling, but he also acknowledges them as indispensable as a broad theme of Swiss national practice.

Thirdly, he illustrates the transference of cultural atmospherics—such as secrecy—into the daily lives and practices of Swiss financiers. Entwined thusly, Silva establishes Switzerland as a tableau on which elements of international intrigue play out; rather than a condemnation of Swiss habits, Silva ultimately endorses them, because Israel literally exploits Swiss opaqueness to its own national interest. Despite hints of victimology in Swiss history, does contemporary Israel prefer recondite Swiss finance?

Bank on it.