

Swiss bird-loving chief of staff who learned to fly Mirage jets from Israelis dies at 75

• By ROSSELLA TERCATIN

In 1979, two Israeli pilots participated in a secret mission in Switzerland. The mission aimed to train the Swiss Air Force pilots to fly Mirage jets in war conditions. Among those involved was a young fighter jet pilot called Christophe Keckeis, nicknamed Pilo, who even hosted one of the Israelis at his home.

This pilot would go on to become the Switzerland's Chief of the General Staff and Chief of the Armed Forces, and, in addition, a great friend of Israel, as Prof. Yossi Leshem from the Department of Zoology at Tel Aviv University told *The Jerusalem Post*. Keckeis passed away at the age of 75 on Friday, after suffering three heart attacks.

Leshem first met the general during a sabbatical year at the University of Lausanne in Switzerland in 2016, when he gave a lecture at the Swiss Air Force base in the town of Payerne, where the Israeli

pilots had worked almost 40 years earlier.

A member of the Israeli air force himself, the professor has devoted a great part of his career to bird research, with a special focus on how to avoid collisions between birds and planes which has led to a 76% decrease in the number of aviation accidents in Israel and has saved an estimated \$790 million.

At the Swiss Air Force base, the professor ran into the son of one of the people who had been involved in the Israeli secret mission, and through this he eventually met Keckeis.

"He was very impressed by the fact that on my phone I had the number of both pilots who had participated, Kobi Richter and Eliezer Adar," Leshem explained.

From that first encounter, the friendship between Leshem and Keckeis flourished, and the general also became a great supporter of Leshem's Barn Owl Project, which uses barn owls as a natural, biolog-



CHRISTOPHE 'PILO' KECKEIS
(Courtesy)

ical prevention against small rodents that harm agriculture. The project also fosters dialogue and cooperation with Palestinian and Jordanian farmers who are employing the technique as well.

In 2017, Keckeis visited Israel. "He was Catholic and he was happy to tour holy sites such as the Jordan River and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, but he was also very

excited to visit places related to our research with birds," Leshem recalled.

During the trip, the general also gave a lecture at the Tel Aviv University, where he shared his memories about the secret Israeli mission.

"Both Kobi Richter and Eliezer Adar are exceptional pilots, I never flew with people at that level, in spite of the fact that I have seen my pilots in my career. Those guys were from another league," he said.

"Every single day we flew together," he added, recalling how by that point he had already been a Mirage pilot for ten years. "I had the modest feeling that I knew a lot about Mirage jets, but I had to learn that I actually knew nothing. As a Swiss, I was absolutely perfect according to the books, but the books also knew nothing on war operations. If you want to be good at war operations, you have to learn to fly out of the box and we did it."

"[Keckeis] was an energetic

and charismatic man, as it is clearly demonstrated by the fact that when I met him he was still flying, at the age of 71" Leshem told the *Post*. "I called his wife just before he passed away and she was able to convey our affection. She told me that he was very moved."

"It was a privilege to have known General Keckeis, he and his deeds will never be forgotten," Ambassador to Switzerland Jacob Keidar wrote in a condolence message to his family. "He was a close friend of Israel and cooperated amicably with the Israel air force and military. I also remember fondly his visit at our residence, when he gave a talk in a conference about the Israeli-Palestinian-Jordanian Barn Owl Project in cooperation with Prof. Yossi Leshem from Tel Aviv University and Prof. Alexandre Roulin from the University of Lausanne. His involvement in this project made him an ambassador for peace."