

TO FREEDOM!

A hero's welcome awaited opera-loving newsman Jeremy Levin after his escape from Lebanese terrorists

by Gary D. Lipton

Fidelio is my story," says Jeremy Levin. Ten days after fleeing a tiny cell in East Lebanon, the fifty-two-year-old Cable News Network news chief bear-hugs his wife, Lucille "Sis" Levin, and exclaims, "Sis is my Leonore, and I'm her Florestan. She crisscrossed the Mideast on my behalf, and I might not be here today without her heroic efforts and the prayers of many wonderful friends. After eleven months, I can finally

whelmed by a tidal wave of cheers. Bruce Langdon, the brave leader of our Iranian captives, saluted me and said, 'You're my hero.'" Sis touches Jerry's shoulder. "Despite that hoopla, you gave one of the greatest speeches, eloquently thanking your Jewish, Christian and Moslem friends." Jerry shrugs. "But I'm not Hans Sachs!"

"My escape was just like a B-movie cliché," insists Levin. The story has all the

contacted the U.S. ambassador in Damascus. Jerry's hosts traded his threadbare pajamas for a blue sweatshirt, slacks and bright white tennis sneakers. Meeting Ambassador Eagleton in Damascus, Levin asked, "Where's Lucille?"

"Sis and I are incurable romantics," explains Jerry. "Otello describes our relationship when he tells Desdemona, 'You loved me for the dangers I had passed, and I loved you that you did pity them.' We've both been through hell and back, which is not unusual for two impractical risk-takers." Sis remembers the first time she heard Verdi's *Otello*. "Searching for Jerry's room in Birmingham, Alabama, I spotted a door with this huge sign: 'Jerry loves Sis!'" Inside the apartment, Jerry played the *Otello* love duet for his fiancée. "That sealed the romance!" laughs Sis. "*Otello* became the theme of our marriage."

Opera has always been a leitmotif in Levin's life. "My grandfather was the chief rabbi of Detroit," he notes, "and my father is a scholar and a fine singer. We always listened to the Met's Saturday afternoon broadcasts, but I never pursued a musical career. My roommate at Northwestern (where I majored in speech) was a budding heldentenor who taught me Iago's part in the vengeance duet. At reunions we wake everybody up bellowing 'Dio vendicator!'"

"O.K., maybe I couldn't sing for my supper," admits Jerry, "but I knew I could become a newsman. While running errands at WBBM-TV in Chicago, I passed one office filled with a wild bunch of screaming crazies—the news department. I was instantly hooked on the business."

Arriving penniless in Manhattan, Jerry made a beeline for the old Met. "It was a dream come true," he remembers. "Charlie Brooks hired me to sell librettos, and after the last intermission he led us to the choicest seats. 'Remember,' he said, 'in tonight's *Rigoletto* you'll see this new kid Alfredo Kraus, and he should be fantastic.' I usually made enough money for cab fare home, and armed with Charlie's inside information I enjoyed all the greats of the early '60s—Tebaldi, Price, Nilsson, Vickers, Corelli. I eventually wrote, directed and produced documentaries for WNEW and WNBC. But even after getting a steady job as a CBS news producer, I kept my part-time Met job."

Moving to Birmingham, the newsman wooed and wed Sis, a driving force behind



walk out into the light and echo Florestan's cry 'zur Freiheit!'—to freedom!"

Savoring his liberty in Manhattan late last February, Jerry headed for the Met's *Die Meistersinger*. "My best friend, Met makeup wizard Victor Callegari, offered me two terrific seats, but Sis was too bushed to go. I invited our Secret Service agent to his first Wagner opera, and he loved the five-and-a-half-hour show. As the Nurembergers greeted Hans Sachs with their mighty 'Wake up!' I got goosebumps at the cobbler's emotional response. That was my welcome home. Imagine stepping into the glare of thirty-seven camera-lights at Andrews Air Force base and being over-

elements of a Steven Spielberg swashbuckler. His jailers, members of the Islamic War (a Shiite Moslem splinter group), normally kept him tied to a wall or a radiator. But on February 13 they loosened the chains, and Jerry seized his golden opportunity. He knotted three blankets together, shimmied out the window and scurried across a starlit mountain range. After hiking for two hours, Jerry sighted a Syrian army patrol. Scrambling under a truck, the barefoot refugee shivered while soldiers circled the hiding place. One curious scout poked his head at the stranger and ordered him to come to headquarters. Recognizing the famous hostage, Syrian officers immediately

the state's arts council. "Jerry was totally dedicated to getting arts programming on the air, and he always said, 'A child without the arts is a deprived child.'" The Levins' kinetic relationship was mutually beneficial. "Sis has an outgoing personality that opens many doors," observes Jerry. "She becomes your friend in two minutes, and before you know it, you're working your tail off for this lady." A moment of reflection. "I used to be a bull in a china shop, and other newsmen learned I had a short fuse." Sis smiles. "During a recent interview, Mike Wallace asked me, 'Is Jerry abrasive?' 'No more than you, Mike!'"

The high-voltage pair loves and respects Victor Callegari. "We've had plenty of rough moments," says Jerry, "and Victor was always there to smooth over troubled waters." "I asked Victor's permission to marry Jerry," adds Sis. "He's a gentle soul who brings people together."

Resettling their family in Houston, the Levins poured their characteristic energy into the news business and the local arts council. Jerry was restless: "I wanted danger and excitement, not a plush desk job. When Ted Turner's CNN dangled the opportunity to head its Rome bureau, Sis and I stuffed our suitcases in a flash." The offer was suddenly withdrawn, and the station dispatched Jerry to Chicago instead. "I didn't get my big overseas assignment," recalls Levin, "but at least I could hit the streets again and cover some big stories—the Tylenol scare, droughts, floods and plane crashes." Sis enrolled in Divinity School at the University of Chicago and rapidly became a mover and shaker on the Illinois Arts Council. But Levin was still itching for the assignment of a lifetime.

Moving to Washington, D.C., Jerry snatched the plum when CNN asked him to take over the Beirut bureau. "Before boarding the plane to Lebanon," Sis remembers, "Jerry whispered to me, 'You're the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me.' The next night, I cried all the way through the Met's *Fidelio*." Three weeks later, Sis visited Jerry in his Mideast home. "At Christmas, Jerry did a lovely story about a Beirut Santa Claus. Watching the telecast in the Virgin Islands, one viewer recognized his long-lost nephew, and after a twenty-five-year separation, the two men were reunited by telephone. That's a typical Jerry Levin story." Sis returned home, and Jerry plunged into the gritty work of covering bitter Lebanese warfare. The assignment ended abruptly on March 7, 1984, when a twenty-year-old gunman forced Jerry Levin into a waiting van. On Ash Wednesday, Sis learned that Jerry

was held prisoner in the Bekaa Valley.

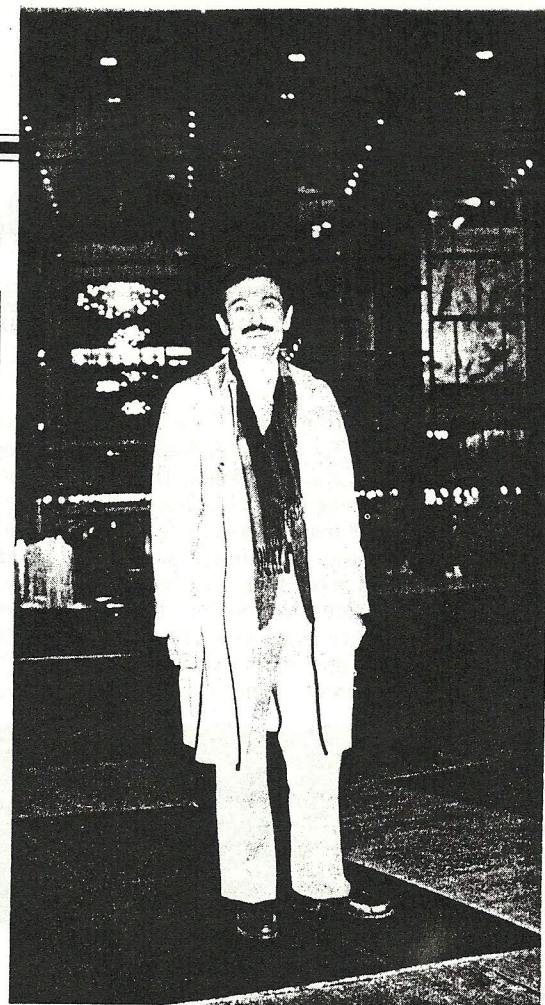
"The politicians and bureaucrats were so cautious," she frowns. "Everyone said, 'We're doing everything we can to free Jerry and the four other American captives. Don't say or do anything that might make the situation worse.'" Nevertheless, she embarked on a personal rescue mission, enlisting Rev. Jesse Jackson and gaining an audience with Syrian Prime Minister Hafez-al-Hasad. "'Jerry is safe,' Syrian sources assured me. 'His captors love him like a brother, and he disarms them with his great warmth.'"

Chained to a radiator in Baalbek, Jerry dreamed about Sis and played mind games to save his sanity. "Since I didn't have pencil and paper, I invented 'Levin's lists,' mentally running through hundreds of statistics. 'Who were the members of that fantastic 1945 Detroit Tigers team?' or 'List the original teams in the National League.'"

"At first, my opera games were painful. Thinking about Sis, I heard the 'bacio' melody from *Otello* or *Lohengrin*'s third-act wedding duet. But I knew my 'Leonore' would do everything possible to save me, so I had better hold myself together. Creating my own Opera Quiz, I 'played' through the operas I had seen as a libretto-seller. Florestan's aria had special meaning—'God, what darkness here!' I hummed, trying to imagine the world beyond my blindfold."

Through prayer and faith, Jerry experienced a profound spiritual awakening. "'Lord, I know you will set me free,' I prayed. 'My only question, *when?*' My captors asked me to choose a Christmas present, and I requested the Bible. I reread the New Testament with a journalist's eye for the big story. Noting how the four 'reporters' covered Jesus' 'stump speech,' I concluded that today Mark could have summarized the Sermon on the Mount for an afternoon tabloid, Matthew might have printed the entire text in *The New York Times*, and Luke would certainly have written the Sunday *Times* editorial. Given Luke's dramatic skill, he would have paused and reflected before exploring the Sermon in the *Atlantic Monthly*. I believed in Jesus' message of forgiveness. Eliminating all vengefulness, I forgave my captors."

After his Valentine's Day escape, a spokesman for the Islamic War insisted that "We released Levin after many approaches by some brotherly and effective sides, for which we have all respect and appreciation." Jerry doesn't challenge that version. "Of course," he quips, "it would have been easier if they had opened the door, saying, 'Make a sharp right turn and keep walking until you reach the first Syr-



ian checkpoint.' But I truly want to believe they let me escape. That's an encouraging sign for the other four American prisoners, and I ask my captors, as I did at Andrews Air Force base, to 'Let my brothers go!'" (As of this writing, seven Americans are still being held in the Bekaa Valley.)

The Levins show no sign of slowing down their frenetic pace. After meeting scarred victims of the Beirut bloodbath, Sis energetically set the wheels in motion for her pet project: "I want to send a cultural peace corps to the Middle East. Instead of exporting guns, we should share our best theater, art, music and educational expertise. Promoting good will throughout the region, this cultural peace corps would be a powerful force in American foreign policy."

Despite his 347-day ordeal, Jerry Levin planned a swift return to the news business. "Sis and I will write a book to set the record straight. But I'm not a bitter man. My two serious regrets in life are that I never saw Claudia Muzio or Jussi Bjoerling onstage." At home, Jerry Levin will once again contemplate a bust of his hero, Ludwig van Beethoven. "In my worst moments of captivity, I remembered what this genius wrote in his Heiligenstadt testament. Losing his hearing, Beethoven suffered a tragedy that would have crushed most musicians. Instead, he penned a powerful declaration of faith: 'Man, help yourself, for you are able.'" Pause. "That's the story of my life!" □

Levin resembled a scraggly-haired Old Testament prophet in the first news photos to appear after his captivity (opp.); in front of the Met last February (above)