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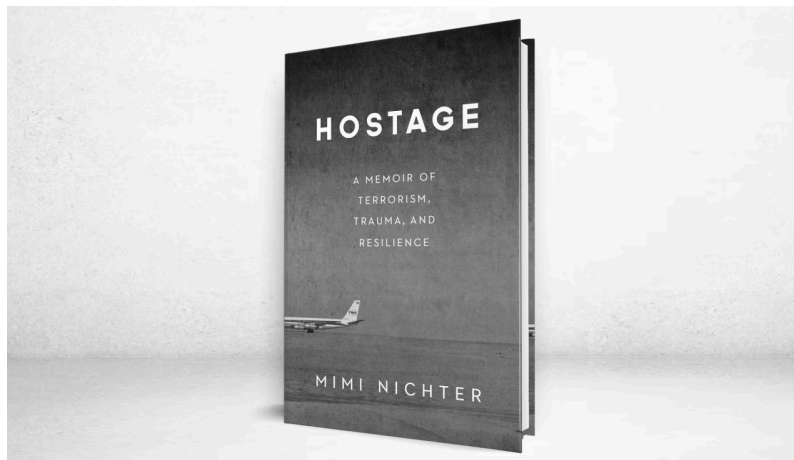
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‘Hostage’ Review: Captivity and Its Aftermath

The author survived a hijacking. Family told her to move on and friends romanticized her ordeal. They couldn’t grasp what she’d been through.

By Diane Cole

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The attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, have mostly wiped from public memory the terrifying wave of skyjackings that imperiled air passengers in the 1960s and early ’70s. Today, when safety regulations tempt us to wax nostalgic for the nearly nonexistent security standards of that earlier era, revisiting the injuries and traumas endured by the passengers on those skyjacked flights provides a jolting course correction.

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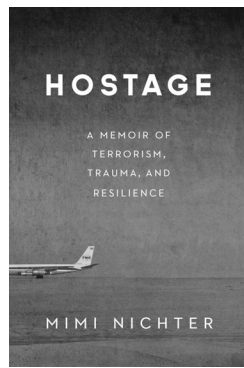
Hostage: A Memoir of Terrorism, Trauma, and Resilience

Mimi Nichter offers her own harrowing account in “Hostage: A Memoir of Terrorism, Trauma, and Resilience.”

Ms. Nichter is now a professor emerita of anthropology at the University of Arizona, but on Sept. 6, 1970, she was a

By Mimi Nichter

Potomac Books



college senior aboard a TWA flight to New York from Israel when, she writes, a bizarre announcement in an unfamiliar accent echoed through the plane: “This is your new captain speaking. You are being taken to a friendly country. Stay calm, we will not harm you.”

The “new captain,” she soon learned, was a member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). Ms. Nichter’s plane was one of four international airliners that members of the terrorist group, armed with guns and grenades, attempted to skyjack that day. Three of them—from TWA, Swissair and Pan Am—were commandeered successfully. A fourth, an Israeli El Al flight, was saved by plainclothes Israeli air marshals who had been placed on board as a new security measure. One of the PFLP perpetrators in that attempt was killed, the other was arrested by British authorities after the plane’s emergency landing in London.

Undaunted, three days later the PFLP took over a fifth plane and landed it, alongside two of the other skyjacked jetliners, on an isolated Jordanian desert airstrip the PFLP had dubbed Revolution Airport. The remaining hijacked aircraft was diverted to Beirut, and then Cairo.

From her window Ms. Nichter could see the other planes. After watching the terrorists wire her aircraft with explosives, she assumed all three planes would be detonated when the time came—a time, she hoped, that would not arrive until after the nearly 400 men, women and children being held captive were freed.

For the next six days the planes’ cramped interiors became their jails. Ms. Nichter and two other college students volunteered to act as camp counselors for eight of the restless children on board. One activity was to teach them John Denver’s song “Leaving on a Jet Plane,” but with the lyrics adapted to “*Living* on a Jet Plane,” as Ms. Nichter recounts, “to reflect our situation.”

Otherwise, levity was in short supply. The lack of electricity, except in rationed spurts, meant searing heat during the day followed by freezing cold during the night. Food and water soon became scarce, thirst and hunger a commonplace, with nauseating odors emanating from the toilets.

The self-proclaimed anti-Zionist, anti-Jewish captors also announced they would be collecting passports, and began taking note of everyone's religion and nationality. That's when Ms. Nichter, who is Jewish, observed passengers around her ripping apart their Israeli passports, stuffing the larger scraps into sickness bags while chewing and swallowing the smaller pieces.

She had never before been discriminated against because of her Jewish heritage. Should she be fearful now? Her worries were heightened when a group of hostages—which included no Jews or Israelis—was freed in return for a pullback of Jordanian forces. Only later did Ms. Nichter read news reports that “the PFLP had specifically refused to release Jewish passengers” and were wary of “potential Zionists, individuals who were staunch supporters of the Jewish state of Israel.”

On the seventh day, all the remaining hostages were transferred from their planes onto minibuses. Then, as the caravan of minibuses began heading away from Revolution Airport, the commandos detonated the bombs they had set on the planes. The explosion, Ms. Nichter writes, became “seared into my memory”—earsplitting blasts, acrid fumes and thick, black plumes of smoke.

For the majority of the hostages, the spectacle marked the end of their ordeal, their minivans ferrying them to a hotel in Amman en route to their release. But not for Ms. Nichter. While still on board her plane, she had been falsely accused by the terrorists of being an Israeli soldier. Their purported evidence: snapshots discovered in Ms. Nichter's backpack of her with Israeli friends in army garb. Was that why she was relegated to the final group of hostages to be released?

Over the next two weeks this last group was shuffled from one secret location to another in and around Amman. At times they and their captors were caught in gunfire exchanges between Jordanian soldiers and Palestinian guerrillas amid the start of the regional civil war known as Black September.

When Ms. Nichter finally arrived back home, she felt disconnected from family members, who urged her to put the past behind her and never think of it again. She also felt “untethered” from her college friends who, she writes, romanticized her time with revolutionaries as “far out” and “cool.” No one seemed to understand that her loss of 25 pounds was not from dieting but from severe malnourishment, or that her sudden lack of enthusiasm for college life reflected the disorientation and shock with which her experience had left her. Only after having kept her story “under wraps for decades” did she feel comfortable opening up about what she had kept within for so long.

More than 50 years have passed, but Ms. Nichter has forgotten almost nothing. She has also learned the sense of healing that can come with remembering. We should be grateful she survived to tell the tale.

—*Ms. Cole is the author of the memoir “After Great Pain: A New Life Emerges.”*

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