

ARAD
DISASTER AT THE ATROCK FESTIVAL
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Summary of a Report to the Israeli Concert Promoters Association

Introduction

On the 18th July 1995 a sixteen year old young woman and a seventeen year old young man died and many others were injured as a result of a crowd crush during ingress to the Atrock Rock Festival in Israel. Two days later a fifteen-year-old young woman also died as a result of injuries she received during the disaster. The immediate response from some politicians was to call for a ban on all similar events.

Shortly after the Arad disaster concert promoter Yahuda Talit (Talit Productions) contacted me. Mr Talit was not involved with the Arad concert, he represented the Israeli Concert Promoters Association (ICPA). The ICPA invited me to go to Israel to make an independent assessment of the disaster, the primary purpose of the visit being to identify the root cause(s) and suggest ways of improving public safety at future concert events. I accepted the invitation on condition that no fee should be paid to me, as my report must represent a truly independent opinion. I had no interest in finding excuses for badly promoted shows. I also insisted that my findings should be made freely available to the official government inquiry team if they wished to read it and that I would be allowed to speak freely to the press if interviewed. These terms were accepted unconditionally by the ICPA and I arrived in Israel on Sunday 6th August 1995, just over one month after the fatal accident. The following account of my visit to Israel is taken from notes written at the time, unfortunately the original report was lost due to a computer failure. To the best of my knowledge however this account reflects an accurate summary of my visit and subsequent conclusions. The findings presented here should not be misinterpreted to be simply an Israeli problem. My international study of concert safety standards leads me to believe that the failures found in Israel can still be found today in other countries, including the UK.

Research method

On my arrival in Israel I was advised that a meeting had been arranged with the ICPA membership that evening. At this meeting concert promoters explained their approach to safety planning, unfortunately however the Atrock Festival promoter was not a member of the ICPA and not available for interview. Press reports of the tragedy had been translated into English for me and I was able to have access to press photographs. I was also advised that two official inquiries had been conducted into the incident, one by the police and a second by the Education and Culture Committee.

I requested a copy of their report from the police but I was advised that it was marked *secret* and therefore not open for inspection by anyone not even relatives of the victims. The reason for secrecy was not explained. Interviews with individual police officers involved with the event were however permitted and given freely. The conclusions of the Education and Culture Committee had not been finally reached therefore it was not possible to have a copy of their report either. I did manage to interview security staff that worked at the event and members of the public who claimed to have attended the concert. These interviews combined with accounts from police officers and press reports and a site visit did enable me to build up a picture of

the role of the police, security staff training level, marketing strategy for the event, , the ingress system design, and most importantly, what actually happened on the 18th July.

The Concert

Arad is a small town in southern Israel approximately 15mins drive from the Dead Sea. For twelve years prior to the 1995 event the town council, under the direction of the mayor, promoted the Arad Festival. Each year the complete town was given over to performers and artistes to stage drama, poetry, mime, street theatre and music. The festival lasts for a full four days and ran continuously twenty four-hours a day. As a performance of one type concludes so an alternative performance began at a different venue or location. A trip to Arad for the festival had become traditional for young Israeli's and foreign visitors to the country.

After the 1991 festival it was decided to allow a promoter to take on the specific task of presenting concerts for a youth culture. Accordingly, the council brought in the FORUM company to stage contemporary rock and/or pop events. Forum was chosen because of their reputation as operators of popular discos, they had also been involved in the promotion of smaller live music events. The added attraction of rock to the festival appears to have worked well during 1992/3/4. During this period there seems to have been little to cause concern to the council, although the major rock promoters in Israel stated at my meeting with the ICPA that they had been concerned over safety standards following the 1994 event. Exactly why the promoters were concerned was not made clear by them, it was simply stated that they felt that crowd safety management was lacking. The ICPA did not voice their concern to any official body, it appeared to be confined to informal association meeting discussion.

By 1995 Forum had graduated from small events to promoting major concerts when they announced their intention to promote the American rock band R.E.M. at the sports stadium in Tel Aviv, although this concert was not actually scheduled until three weeks after the Arad festival. Nevertheless the company appears to have felt sufficiently confident to promote the Arad concert. The 1995 show would be bigger and better than anything that they had done previously. To ensure working capital they took on two brothers by the name of Schwartz and together they secured an open field site that was approved for a capacity of 18,000 people. Capacity attendance appeared to be based on the UK principle of 0.5m² (two persons per square metre).

As a temporary site the promoters needed to fence off the required area and this they did by erecting an 8ft high temporary wire mesh fence. The fence was supported at the base by standing each panel in concrete base blocks. Each panel is then linked to the next by inserting horseshoe type clips into the top of the hollow tubes of each panel. This type of fence is in common use at building sites and events held at temporary sites throughout Europe but it is not designed to take a pressure load without any form of bracing. No bracing appears to have been used at Arad.

Entry to the site for the public was via *one entrance only*. Staff supplied by a private security company controlled this entry gate. Police officers were also in attendance at the gate in some considerable number and they had complete authority to take on the spot decisions in all matters both inside and outside of the site. It was interesting to note during interviews with police officers that every one of them insisted that *they*

had final responsibility for public safety matters *not* the private security company. The attitude of the police was perhaps shaped by the volatile political situation that existed in Israel at that time. Terrorist attacks were common then, and still are today in Israel.

To ensure that people without tickets did not attempt to gain entry by climbing over the fence the promoters appear to have taken the decision to fix barbed wire at the top of each panel. The decision to install the wire could perhaps have been regarded by the organisers as a visible deterrent because, as stated previously, this type of temporary fence will not take the pressure load imposed by a single person let alone a crowd intent on seeing a free show. Although the local police claimed responsibility for public safety they did not appear to be aware of the weaknesses of this particular type of fence installation and they did not object to it at the planning stage.

The festival was billed as a presentation of three days of rock music to be held on the evenings of 18th, 19th and 20th of July 1995. Customers could purchase a one-event ticket for sixty-shekels (approximately £20) or by purchasing a three-day ticket for which customers would be entitled to a discount. The system for retailing tickets in Israel required that a licensed ticket agency handle the distribution of all tickets sold. This rule is to ensure that events are not over sold. On this occasion ticket sales were handled by the HADRAN AGENCY based in Tel Aviv. Tickets for the three-day event sold well and there was a particularly heavy demand for the first concert on the 18th. This show was billed as the farewell performance by Israel's top rock group MACHINA. Although unknown to European audiences, Machina had dominated rock sales charts in Israel for the past twelve years and the demand to see their last performance was such that this particular show sold out quickly.

Event marketing

The marketing policy for the Atrock festival appears to have played a major part in the incident that cost three lives. The promoters of the three day event undertook a private agreement with local banks to offer any person that opened a bank account with a minimum deposit of thirty shekels (£10), would receive a voucher that could be exchanged for a reduced price single day ticket. This offer was subject to availability of tickets on any particular day at the box office and *did not* guarantee a ticket. Many young Israeli's however mistakenly took this marketing campaign to be an offer of a single day ticket at a reduced price. In short, they thought that they had already got a ticket for any day. Not surprisingly many young people rushed to open bank accounts in order to get a voucher. Very few people appear to have read the small print on the back of the voucher. Literally hundreds of young people now held what they firmly believed to be a ticket for a show that was already widely known to be sold out when in fact what they held was a conditional voucher that did not guarantee entry to the event. Subsequently a great many voucher holders turned up on the 18th expecting to get in.

The incident

Doors opened to the public at 2045hrs the opening of the doors was dictated by the length of time taken for the sound check of those groups that were appearing. Sound checks are necessary to establish a correct balance for the artiste and to enable the sound engineer to set his/her control panels for light and sound for each act. This particular sound check appears to have taken a great deal longer than most as it was

not completed until 2030hrs. The key factor in this case is that the first act was due to appear on stage at 2100hrs. This time frame indicates that only *fifteen minutes* was allowed from the gates opening for the public to enter and the first act appearing on stage. Witnesses stated to me that at the time gates was opened there was a large crowd, estimated in thousands, waiting to get in. With only *one entry gate* in use it was highly unlikely that more than a few hundred could have been admitted in time for the opening of the concert. Although the first act was not the headline act, the sound of live music being heard by those on the outside was bound to cause crowd control problems for the security staff. A normal admission time for this size attendance would be expected to take in the region of two hours, however this is largely dependent on the number and location of ingress gates.

Interviewees stated that there were approximately twenty private security guards at the entry gate backed up by ten/ twelve police officers and they do not appear to have coped effectively with the initial opening rush. Reports suggest that there was little attempt at establishing a linear queue pattern and bulk queuing quickly formed at the gate. A bulk queue situation was allowed to grow out of control for the next forty-five minutes as security and police made frantic efforts to get as many people as possible through the gate.

The security guards stated that they had not been made aware of the likelihood of people turning up with vouchers and expecting to gain entry. When this did happen security staff attempted to turn them away fearing that had found forged tickets, or at best referred them to the box office which had sold out of tickets for that show. With so many people arriving with vouchers the gate soon became totally blocked with people refusing to move until they had exchanged their voucher for a ticket, and those people with tickets who were becoming very frustrated by the fact that they could hear that the show had began but could not get in.

At 2145hrs a police officer became so concerned over the situation at the gate that he took it upon himself to go to the stage and ask the support group to stop playing. The group stopped playing and the police officer left the stage. After waiting a short while and with no further information given to them however the group began to play again. After two songs it was made known to the group that there was a serious problem on site and they stopped for the second time, this time they left the stage. At 2200hrs the police officer in charge at the site gave instructions to close the gate because he was afraid that the site would become overcrowded. This was done by a combined team of police officers and security staff.

Once the gate were closed the pressure from the crowd on the outside built up to a point where a lateral surge was spontaneously triggered onto the perimeter fence, which then collapsed taking with it the closed gate. The fence fell inward onto a section of the crowd on the inside, trapping them underneath it. This sudden pressure release carried people from outside to inside like a tidal wave. As people were carried forward they trampled over the ones trapped underneath. Those underneath were not able to lift the fence due to the weight on top of them, others close to what had been the top of the fence were trapped by the barbed wire fixed to each panel and of course, the panels were linked together.

Once the combined security and police team was able to establish control it was quickly realised that two people were dead and many injured. The show was then cancelled that night. Press reports of the incident claim that it took three hours to clear casualties from the site to hospital. Two days later the news was announced that a third person had died as a result of her injuries. Attempts were made to stage the remaining two shows but the artistes refused to take part and these shows were then cancelled.

The promoter(s)

The decision on ingress facility design and fence type for an event that was known to have sold out 18,000 tickets in advance appears to indicate a lack of knowledge of pedestrian flow planning. The fixing of barbed wire to prevent non-ticket holders gaining entry actually indicates that those in charge of the production possibly suspected those problems could occur that night. In which case measures should have been taken to brace the whole fence line and install at least two more ingress gates.

No ingress flow calculations were available from the promoter, the police or private security at Arad therefore it is not known how the organisers considered design for crowd safety in terms of pedestrian flow.

The police

According to information provided by the Israeli Concert Promoters Association the police officer in charge of the event was immediately dismissed and the area police chief posted to another area, consequently it was not possible to interview these two officers. The disciplinary action taken by the police however appears to have been taken before either of the two subsequent independent inquiries had even began. If accurate, the actions of the police are puzzling, as they (the police) appear to have acknowledged their lack of crowd safety management planning.

Interviews with individual officers led me to understand that the Israeli police do not train officers of any rank in proactive crowd management. This is by no means rare, I have never discovered a police force in any country that I have worked in to have provided crowd management training, they all train for crowd control. By setting themselves up as *the* authority on site however an assumption might be made that the Israeli police did approve site design and safety standards. The role of the police prior to the concert and during the incident is, by their own speedy disciplinary actions, to say the least questionable.

Private security

Interviews with security staff in Israel revealed that formal training in proactive crowd management strategies was not a condition of their licence to work. All of the persons interviewed (8) claimed that their experience of working with concert crowds gave them an advantage over police officers but nevertheless they were not invited, or permitted, to advise the police on such issues.

Conclusions

It is common for the media to report that a crowd related fatal incident occurred as a result of panic or irrational crowd behaviour. The Arad tragedy was no exception, it was widely regarded to have been caused by people trying to gain free entry to a sold

out show. In my opinion however the tragedy was caused by a combination of serious errors by separate organisations involved with the event. These errors occurred for a number of reasons, listed here as follows:

- A failure to understand natural laws of crowd dynamics by the event planners
- No contingency planning for ingress
- A failure to understand crowd cultural behaviour (crowd psychology) by event planners
- Poor systems design (perimeter fence & ingress system)
- A marketing strategy that invited chaos
- Lack of police training for proactive crowd management
- Poor communications on site
- Total absence of command and control
- No risk analysis – risk assessment – event plan

In view of what I considered to be the above failures, it was my opinion that the crowd tragedy at Arad was not caused by irresponsible crowd behaviour or disorder. It was caused by a combination of lack of understanding of planning for crowd safety management by organisers and a failure by the police to cope with a role that they had insisted that they be responsible for. As stated previously, these are common problems today at some events at international level. It is a constant source of amazement to me that the safety management of peaceful crowds is still not recognised as a social science anywhere in the world to my knowledge.

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