

# TO FREEDOM!

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

by Gary D. Lipton

**F**idelio 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 criss-crossed 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

