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A Tycoon's Mysterious Death

BY KEN GROSS

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THE LAST TIME HE WAS SEEN ALIVE WAS in the inky hours before dawn on Nov. 5. Robert Maxwell, the 68-year-old billionaire publisher, was pacing the deck of his plush yacht, *Lady Ghislaine*, as it cruised with its crew of 13 off the coast of Tenerife in the Canary Islands. Just 13 hours later, after he had vanished from the decks of the 430-ton vessel, Maxwell's naked body was hoisted from the ocean by helicopter. A preliminary autopsy reported he had died of natural causes—possibly a heart attack—fueling official speculation that he had then somehow fallen overboard. However, the report did little to quiet rumors that Maxwell had committed suicide or had even fallen victim to foul play.

Although the sea was calm that night off Tenerife, the flamboyant British media tycoon had been sailing in exceedingly troubled waters for the past few weeks. He took the solo cruise aboard his beloved *Ghislaine* hoping it would bring a brief respite from his troubles and help cure a persistent cold. He was in the midst of a vituperative international brawl with American investigative journalist Seymour Hersh, who charges in his new book, *The Samson Option*, that Maxwell and one of Maxwell's news editors in Britain, Nicholas Davies, were involved with the Mossad, the Israeli intelligence agency, and that Davies had been instrumental in surreptitious arms dealings with Iran in the '80s. Maxwell dismissed the allegations as "utter rubbish" and filed a libel suit against Hersh. Yet two weeks ago he wound up firing Davies, ostensibly for lying about his ties to an American arms dealer. (Hersh claims that he will soon break "a very big story" about Maxwell and his intelligence connections.) At the same time, the tycoon's financial empire—which included the Maxwell Communication Corporation, owner of the Macmillan Inc. publishing house as well as the *New York Daily News*—was reported sinking in debt, possibly as deep as \$3 billion. Still, those closest to Maxwell find it unthinkable that he would take his own life. "What normal people consider pressure was meat and drink to Robert Maxwell," London *Daily Mirror* editor Richard Stott told a reporter.

Maxwell had spent a lifetime battling his way out of trouble. Born Jan Ludvik Hoch, one of nine children, to Hasidic Jewish farmers in Czechoslovakia, the future tycoon stood his ground against town bullies and anti-Semites during periodic pogroms. "I was not afraid," he said. In 1939, at the start of World War II, the 16-year-old left his family and moved into the forests of the Carpathian mountains to fight the Germans. Later he would make his way to England, where he became a captain in the British Army, was decorated for heroism and entered British Intelligence. After the war, through contacts he made in Germany, Maxwell began putting together his publishing empire. With money borrowed from the family of his wife, Elisabeth Meynard, he launched Pergamon Press, a group of scientific and academic journals that formed the basis of his fortune.

Maxwell had his share of detractors. In certain upper-crust circles he was seen as an upstart with questionable business ethics and a vulgar style. And his insatiable zest for the limelight led to the creation of a cartoon caricature called Cap'n Bob, a bumbling, overweight oaf who appears regularly in the satiric British magazine *Private Eye*. Maxwell, who sued for libel at the least perceived insult, had his revenge in 1986 when he won a judgment after the magazine accused him of trying to buy an aristocratic title.

A 290-lb. six-footer with a booming baritone voice, Maxwell was an intimidating presence in the newsroom or boardroom. Though he claimed to be a socialist and was a Labour Member of Parliament from 1964 to 1970, he could be utterly ruthless in eliminating union jobs. He was no kinder to management. "My job," he recently said, with evident zest, "is to fire editors."

Maxwell is survived by Elisabeth, his wife of 46 years, and their three sons and four daughters (including Ghislaine, for whom his yacht was named). He will also be survived by his myth. "He was larger than life," said British Conservative Party MP Anthony Beaumont-Dark. "He was the Citizen Kane of his time."

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TERRY SMITH in London ■

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