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Who Was That Special Passenger?

By MASEEH RAHMAN Monday, Jan. 17, 2000

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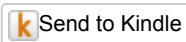
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At one point during the eight-day hijacking of Indian Airlines Flight 814, the abductors demanded \$200 million from the Indian government. Little did they know that one of the hostages sitting in economy class could have effortlessly written them a check for that amount. Roberto Giori, owner of the Lausanne-based company De La Rue Giori, boarded Flight 814 after a holiday in Katmandu with his companion Cristina Calabresi. De La Rue Giori, which Giori inherited from his father, happens to control 90% of the world's

currency-printing business. The 50-year-old Giori, who holds dual Swiss and Italian nationality, is one of Switzerland's richest men. When the plane was hijacked over northern India, Giori and other business-class passengers were herded into economy. The scariest moment came three hours later when the pilot tried to land at the airport in Lahore, Pakistan. I thought it was the end, Giori later recalled. The runway was not visible because the lights were off, the plane had no fuel and the pilot even tried to land on a brightly lit road next to the airport.

After the plane landed in Kandahar, southern Afghanistan, where it would remain for seven days, Switzerland sent a special envoy to the airport to deal with the abduction of its currency king, his companion and two other Swiss nationals. It also put pressure on New Delhi to come to a solution that ensured their safe release. Meanwhile, Giori experienced harassment and deprivation along with the rest of the passengers, including irregular rice-and-mutton-curry meals, inadequate drinking water, no tea or coffee, stinking toilets and sudden bursts of temper from the hijackers. On top of that came constant lectures from the hostage-takers on Islam and the Kashmir separatist struggle, piped through the passenger address system. According to Giori, the hijackers told the hostages: As you suffer, think of how our brothers suffer in Indian jails.

After being freed and flown to New Delhi, Giori said: I realized suddenly that these men had no problem killing or getting killed. I am one hundred thousand percent certain they would have fought until the end. They were extremely well-trained and highly motivated. Giori said he was convinced that if India hadn't released militant leader Maulana Masood Azhar, the hijackers would have forced the aircraft to take off and then deliberately crashed it into the hills around Kandahar.

The week-long ordeal had an unexpected impact on the currency tycoon. What I experienced on the plane has changed me forever, said Giori. I don't know what it is: Hinduism, the so-called fatalism of Indians. But the way the passengers stayed so calm throughout, even the children, was exemplary. I told myself, if the plane had been full of Italians or French, it would have been very different.

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