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Conviction of L.A. 'Fence' Tied to Nationwide Probe

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In the eyes of the jury that convicted him of receiving stolen property, Saied Kalimi Aframian was a Los Angeles jeweler who bought two expensive watches taken in a \$550,000 armed robbery of an exclusive Washington department store.

But to FBI investigators, the conviction only scratched the surface.

They believe that in the last two years Aframian was an indispensable player in a small, well-organized ring of robbers who traveled across the country from their homes in Southwest Los Angeles to pull a series of jewelry store holdups. Aframian, FBI investigators believe, was the "fence"-the man who bought and resold millions of dollars worth of stolen jewelry.

That assertion, based primarily on statements made by a member of the robbery ring who is now cooperating with authorities, is expected to be aired next month when Aframian is sentenced in Los Angeles Superior Court.

The prosecutor, who will use the ongoing FBI investigation to lobby for the heaviest possible sentence, says Aframian's alleged activities are a classic example of the symbiotic relationship between thieves and fences.

Historically, prosecutors and police have argued that crime could not flourish if fences were punished with the same sort of firmness that is directed at criminals who break into homes or rob stores. But according to the most recent state statistics, average state prison sentences for receiving stolen property are half as long as sentences for robbery and burglary.

Washington Robbery

Aframian, a 28-year-old Iranian national who runs a small store in Los Angeles' downtown jewelry district, was convicted in July of receiving stolen property from the September, 1984, daytime holdup of the jewelry section of the Neiman-Marcus store in Washington. The robbery, the largest committed in the nation's capital in recent years, netted \$550,000 worth of expensive rings and watches.

Aframian and a co-defendant, Khosrow Rahimian, 28, who owns a jewelry store in the same building in Los Angeles' jewelry district, have been held in Los Angeles County Jail since their convictions. Superior Court Commissioner Judith Abrams revoked their bail on the grounds that they might flee before sentencing.

FBI agents who investigated the Neiman-Marcus robbery say the former gang member, who is now cooperating with them, told them that it was one in a string of jobs pulled by a ring whose holdups in California and several other states have netted, the agents believe, between \$5 million and \$10 million in jewelry.

Four members of the group—all believed to have participated in the Neiman-Marcus robbery—have been taken into custody in the last several months.

The first two, the alleged ringleader and his girlfriend, were arrested in an unrelated case, the armed robbery of a Bullock's store in Century City last June.

Subsequently, the woman, Ivory Diane Stowe, 28, agreed to plead guilty and become a government witness against her boyfriend, Winzel Bryant, 27, and other defendants. That helped the FBI identify and locate the other two Neiman-Marcus robbery suspects, Gregory Barnes, 24, and Ralph Bryant, 22, Winzel Bryant's brother. They were arrested on an FBI arrest warrant in Southwest Los Angeles on Oct. 25.

Barnes and Ralph Bryant were identified as the Neiman-Marcus gunmen by witnesses in the store, according to an affidavit written by FBI Agent Daniel A. Reilly, who investigated the case for the bureau's Washington office.

(Los Angeles Police Department investigators say they do not believe that the suspects arrested in the Neiman-Marcus case are connected to another much larger ring composed of teen-agers and young men from South-Central Los Angeles. That ring has been linked with about 50 jewelry robberies in Western states this year. The most recent robbery believed committed by the ring occurred in Reseda on Tuesday.

(In addition, Beverly Hills police have dismissed their earlier suspicion that Barnes and Ralph Bryant were among the gunmen who participated in a daytime armed robbery at an exclusive jewelry store in the Beverly Wilshire Hotel last August, in which \$250,000 was taken. Police raised that possibility publicly when the men were arrested.)

Series of Robberies

In several interviews with the FBI last summer, Stowe told of participating in a series of robberies in which the proceeds were routinely sold to Aframian, according to transcripts of the interviews filed in Los Angeles Superior Court.

Stowe said she, Barnes, the two Bryants and several other individuals participated in one or more jewel robberies in Denver, Seattle, San Jose, Florida, Riverside, Century City and the downtown Los Angeles jewelry district, according to the FBI interview.

She said that after the Neiman-Marcus robbers had returned home, she watched Aframian buy the entire heist for between \$80,000 and \$100,000 in cash.

Stowe said that Aframian would visit the house she shared with Winzel Bryant to pick up jewelry from robberies and that she on several occasions traveled to Aframian's jewelry shop to receive payment once he had examined the proceeds.

On other occasions, Stowe said, Aframian haggled with the robbers over the price they wanted for their stolen goods, arguing that his profits were diminished by the need to melt down some of the jewelry and remove gemstones.

Stowe said that Aframian often talked on the telephone with Winzel Bryant and that Aframian wired Bryant money on several occasions when Bryant was out of town on robberies.

Telephone records from a Langley Park, Md., motel, where witnesses said the four suspects stayed for two weeks before the Neiman-Marcus robbery, showed that seven

telephone calls were made from the motel to Aframian's home or jewelry shop, according to FBI Agent Reilly's arrest warrant affidavit.

A federal grand jury in Washington has heard Stowe's description of her activities with the two Bryants, Barnes and Aframian, but so far only Stowe has been indicted, according to a source familiar with the case.

The robbers' alleged link to Aframian surfaced in two ways.

Last December, while investigating the unrelated theft of a \$50,000 jewelry collection in Culver City, detectives from the Los Angeles Police Department's pawnshop detail, which investigates stores that sell secondhand merchandise, received a tip that the stolen jewelry was being sold at Aframian's shop.

Serial Numbers Spotted

While visiting the store, Detective Charles Oakley wrote down the serial numbers of a number of expensive watches. A computer check identified them as among those taken in the Neiman-Marcus robbery. Later, other jewelry from the holdup was found in Rahimian's shop, a few doors away from Aframian's, police said. The district attorney's office filed receiving-stolen-property charges against the two men in March.

Then, in late June, Los Angeles police arrested Stowe and Winzel Bryant along with several other suspects in the robbery of Bullock's in Century City. In what officers characterized as an attempt to win favorable treatment, Stowe volunteered to plead guilty and testify against Bryant, with whom she said she had broken up after the Neiman-Marcus robbery.

Deputy Dist. Atty Joseph P. Charney said that at Aframian's sentencing hearing, scheduled for Dec. 6, he will refer to Stowe's statements to the FBI and will try to persuade Commissioner Abrams to send Aframian to state prison for four years and four months.

Receipt of stolen property is punishable by three years in prison, with 16 extra months allowable for probation violations. Both Aframian and Rahimian, who is to be sentenced by Abrams on Dec. 13, are on probation after being convicted of participating in a credit-card fraud scheme based in the Los Angeles jewelry district in 1981.

Charney said he believes Stowe's description of Aframian as "the key contact man" for the robbery ring.

"I feel very strongly about the role fences play in promoting the kind of violent theft that goes on on such a large scale," Charney said. "If there were not these kind of fences around to act as a means of allowing transfer of such substantial quantities of valuable materials, there would be less of a motivation for this to go on. It's impossible to get rid of this quantity of goods unless you have an illegal business relationship with fences like this."

Fencing Thought Common

Aframian's attorney, Scott Furstman, declined to comment on Charney's allegation. Police who have worked in the jewelry district, centered on Hill Street between 6th and 7th streets, say they believe that trading in stolen property is commonplace among the estimated 1,000 jewelers who work there.

"Within those three or four blocks, the crime is just totally incomprehensible," said Detective Richard Levos.

In 1981, police raided one building in the district, the Theater Jewelry Center at Hill and

7th streets, and arrested 51 merchants in booths and street-front shops on charges of buying hundreds of stolen credit cards that had been used to quickly run up phony jewelry sales. Purchase slips had been sent to banks, which lost an estimated \$300,000.

At the time, police said they had been receiving persistent reports of widespread fencing of stolen jewelry among many merchants in the district. They believed this accommodating attitude toward thieves was responsible for a significant percentage of jewelry robberies in the downtown area.

In one of the largest conspiracy cases prosecuted in Los Angeles, 32 businessmen—including Aframian and Rahimian and five members of their families—were convicted after pleading no-contest to charges of fraud, forgery or grand theft. Most were placed on probation.

Atmosphere of Greed

According to statements many of the accused jewelers made to probation officers, the atmosphere at the Theater Jewelry Center in 1981 was one of unbridled greed.

Undercover police officers, posing as thieves with credit cards to sell, were intercepted on their way to shops in the mart by other merchants anxious to offer a better price for the stolen cards, investigators said.

Levos, one of the undercover officers, said police "separated the merchants into three classes: sharks, barracudas and fish," the sharks being those who most aggressively tried to buy stolen credit cards and run off phony charges. "**Saied (Aframian)** and Khosrow (Rahimian) were definitely sharks," Levos said in an interview.

The prosecutor in the credit-card case, John C. Spence III, described Rahimian as the "corporate vice president" of the merchant fraud ring.

Detectives said many of those prosecuted in the case subsequently moved their businesses out of the Theater Jewelry Center.

Another jeweler who was arrested and pleaded no contest in the credit-card fraud case said the competitive nature of the jewelry district is more responsible for such crime than sheer greed. "Too many of the people were young, and they started going different ways," said the jeweler, a 25-year-old Middle Eastern immigrant who spoke on the condition his name not be used.

Two groups that represent jewelers and have strong interests in the subject of jewel thefts, the California Jewelers Assn. and the New York-based Jewelry Security Alliance, declined to discuss the subject of fencing among jewelers. "The less said, the better," said a spokeswoman for the California Jewelers Assn.

Police contend that many of the immigrant merchants from the Middle East bring with them business attitudes that are amoral by Western standards.

Sherman Oaks Robbery

The case of another downtown jeweler who was convicted of buying the proceeds of a large Sherman Oaks robbery appears to be an example, according to statements contained in court documents.

Last Feb. 16, three robbers held up William Roberts Jewelers and took \$150,000 worth of jewelry. Within hours, thanks to a report of a license-plate number, police made three arrests. According to a police report, one of the suspects, Ricci Davis, quickly volunteered to lead officers to Mahmoud Shapouri, 29, of Beverly Hills, who Davis said had bought the proceeds of several robberies that he and the other suspects had

conducted.

At 3:30 the next morning, officers went to Shapouri's jewelry shop on Hill Street and found Shapouri walking out the door, carrying a bag with between \$150,000 and \$200,000 worth of jewelry, the arrest report said. Police said Shapouri admitted to them that the property was stolen and that he had paid \$12,000 for about \$80,000 worth of jewelry taken from the Sherman Oaks store.

Police said other merchandise recovered from Shapouri's business was identified as having been taken in between 12 and 18 jewelry store robberies in Southern California and Nevada. Shapouri pleaded guilty to receiving stolen property but in an interview with a county probation officer he denied involvement in any organized scheme.

His problem, according to a family psychiatrist quoted in a county probation report, was that "he has been almost obsessed with becoming successful in America, and proving to all that he is a successful businessman." Shapouri believed that he had done nothing more than engage in "shrewd and conventional business practices" and that "his actions were commonplace among the Iranian businessmen, both at home in Tehran as well as the relocated businessmen in the United States," the psychiatrist wrote.

The prosecutor in the case, Deputy Dist. Atty. Lonnie Felker, said he will argue for a sentence of two years in state prison when Shapouri is sentenced Dec. 5. But Deputy County Probation Officer James Wright, who wrote the pre-sentencing report, recommended that Shapouri not be sent to state prison because he has no prior record. Wright recommended a "suitable" period of time in County Jail and five years' probation.

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