

CHEMICAL COWBOYS

THE DEA'S SECRET MISSION TO HUNT DOWN
A NOTORIOUS ECSTASY KINGPIN

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63 TRACKING THE WOLF

WHEN GADI ESHED RETURNED to Israel from his assignment in Holland in 1995, he had been promoted to head of the Intelligence section at Tel Aviv's Central Unit, the largest investigations and intelligence unit in Israel. He oversaw about 120 officers in the Serious Crimes division, which handled vice, drug trafficking, murder, and organized crime. A lot had changed while Eshed was away. As Israel was entrenched in defending herself in a seemingly endless border war, internecine warfare was being waged among crime families within her borders.

The American notion of the Mafia, informed by *The Godfather* and *The Sopranos*, conjures warring factions drawn up by generations of family bloodlines. However, organized crime in Israel in the early 1970s was actually drawn up by neighborhoods, so that if a drug dealer grew up in Jerusalem, he would pay tribute to the Jerusalem group. In return, he brought the name of the group's leader, the de facto godfather, to the table as his backing in deals. It was a provincial structure that died out in the 1980s as the gangsters spent more time in jail, meeting their future partners, and then expanding business beyond their villages and cities to national and international venues.

Israeli gangsters fight over control of the typical rackets—extortion, prostitution, drugs, weapons, and gambling—and solutions to Mafia disputes come in several forms. There are arbitrators, often retired

bosses, who hold meetings, let both sides air their grievances, and then render a binding decision. (Arbitrators commonly rule in favor of the guy who pays the bigger bribe.) There are leg breakers from the collection-and-protection rackets who exert pressure on one party to pay up. And when it's time to cut to the chase, there are plenty of freelance hit men available to carry out liquidations. Problem solved.

Until 1993, the Israeli mob boss who killed his way to the top and ruled for more than a decade was Yehezkel Aslan. Aslan grew up a poor Iraqi immigrant in the slums of Ha-Tiqwa, a south Tel Aviv neighborhood. He pulled himself up from poverty, first by selling soap at the Central Bus Station, then by injecting heroin into the streets, and finally by controlling the lucrative underground gambling rings in Tel Aviv.

By the late 1980s, globalization and the fall of the Soviet Union had created new opportunities for Aslan and his rivals to combine their loan sharking, extortion, and illegal gambling businesses in Israel with the ownership of legitimate casinos in Turkey and Eastern Europe. They ran package tours, chartering planes to fly Israelis for gambling weekends and vacations. Some six hundred thousand gamblers spent an estimated \$4 billion in the Mafia-owned casinos every year. Aslan moved his family to a large gated home in the upscale coastal suburb of Herzliya Pituach—Miami Beach on the Mediterranean.

Aslan was king, and his main business rival, Ze'ev "the Wolf" Rosenstein, was just at his heels. There was plenty of business for the top families below them—the Abutbuls of Netanya, the Alperons of Givat Shmuel, the Abergils of Lod, and the Ohanas of Kfar Saba. But soon it appeared that Ze'ev Rosenstein had decided he preferred a monopoly over a power share.

On February 24, 1993, Yehezkel Aslan was sitting in his black BMW with a twenty-three-year-old woman outside the Pisces restaurant in Tel Aviv. A car pulled up and a masked gunman fired five times, killing the mob boss and injuring the girl. Aslan was forty-three. More than a thousand mourners attended his funeral. Even Ha-Tiqwa heroin junkies praised the crime boss, pointing out to reporters that he was a donor to the local rehab center.

Police lacked the evidence to charge Rosenstein for murder, but it

was clear that the Wolf had benefited from the killing. Aslan's death vaulted Rosenstein to the position of number one Israeli mafioso and ignited a fierce war. The Aslan clan wanted revenge. In 1995, Eshed had returned to Tel Aviv from his Hague post in time to wade through the blood feud.

In the summer of 1996, Rosenstein was sitting at a traffic light in the center of Tel Aviv when he was hit twice by gunmen from a passing car. He stepped on the gas, drove himself to a hospital, and survived. Eshed was at the scene when police arrested three suspects, one of whom was Ilan Aslan, the brother of slain godfather Yehezkel. Still, Rosenstein told police he had no idea who would want to kill him.

A few weeks later, a judge granted the three attackers release from custody while the investigation continued. Ilan Aslan vanished without a trace. (The rumor goes that one would have to dig very deep to find Aslan under the giant mall that was being built in the center of Tel Aviv.) A year later, police received an anonymous phone call telling them where to find the body of the second attacker. The third gunman was later tried for murder, acquitted, and then shot to death while leaving a restaurant.

Police had no proof, but they believed the killings to be Rosenstein's work.

In frustration, Yehezkel Aslan's widow, Shoshana, sent a message that spread among underworld hit men that she was willing to pay any sum of money to have Rosenstein killed. On June 27, 1996, a little before 7:00 p.m., Shoshana was getting home from grocery shopping, bags in her hands, when her eleven-year-old son ran out to greet her and saw a hit man walk up behind his mother and shoot her in the head. Shoshana Aslan became another unsolved murder.

A year later, Eshed and his colleagues received a tip that Meny Aslan, an adult son of Yehezkel and Shoshana, was determined to kill Rosenstein himself in revenge for the death of his parents and his vanished uncle, Ilan. The police made a strategic decision to cover Meny Aslan—they were betting that Rosenstein had already learned about Meny's murderous intent and would move first.

Nearly a hundred officers took part in top-secret 24/7 surveillance. It was a tremendous undertaking, with cops stationed in ambush and

surveillance positions covering Meny's daily movements for several weeks. The Aslan house in Herzliya Pituach was on a quiet cul-de-sac and police had to install secret cameras on the block in order to watch the house from vans nearby without being seen by Meny or his neighbors.

Even an old man in a hat and sunglasses who was seen walking his dog past the Aslan residence piqued the officers' suspicions. One astute detective noticed that the man had driven into the neighborhood to walk his dog. On a hunch, police followed him back to Jaffa and discovered he was really an old-school criminal named Jacob Cohen. Eshed knew then that their assumption was correct—preparations for a hit were under way. After all, you can't kill someone without collecting information first: What does the intended victim look like? When does he leave his house? Where are the main entrances and exits? Does he have bodyguards?

On September 10, 1997, the police ambushed two hit men, brothers, outside Meny's office. The fraternal assassins eventually cooperated, giving up the name of the person who sent them; that person cooperated and it went all the way up the chain to a man named Nahman Cohen. And this is where it would end.

Nahman Cohen was a well-known hit man and boss who had previously served seventeen years for murder and was known to run with both Israeli Mafia and criminals abroad—including the *yordim* Ecstasy traffickers. Sources close to Oded Tuito once told Pittsburgh agent Gregg Drews that the Fat Man kept Nahman Cohen on his own payroll as an enforcer.

The Israeli police learned through secret intelligence that Cohen had facilitated the murder contract with a promise of \$50,000 for Meny Aslan's head. Cohen's order surely came straight from Ze'ev Rosenstein, but police had no proof. Cohen got fifteen years for the attempt on Aslan's life—and he never gave up the Wolf.

Ze'ev Rosenstein was a master at putting so many layers between himself and crime that police could never charge him for murder, extortion, fraud, or any of the activities that allegedly secured his wealth and position at the top. In fact, he had just one conviction to his name, in 1978, when he was twenty-two, for armed robbery. He liked to tell the press that he was a serious businessman—and that his

jealous competitors were trying to dirty up his name with talk of murder and the Mafia.

Intelligence indicated to Eshed that, for now, the criminal networks that ran the Ecstasy trade in America were primarily *yordim*. But while Bob Gagne was focused on Oded Tuito and Sean Erez, Eshed had his eye on the Wolf. Ze'ev Rosenstein was a vicious competitor and Israeli police were already stretched too thin to bridle the power struggles that would arise if the Wolf decided to stake his claim in America's Ecstasy market.