



WORLD & NATION

The Rise and Fall of an Unlikely Drug-Smuggling Ring

By ALINA TUGEND

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The offer was spread in quiet conversations among young Orthodox Jews from Brooklyn and Monsey, N.Y. They'd get \$1,500 and a round-trip ticket to Europe if they were willing to carry back suitcases full of diamonds.

About a dozen said yes.

But it wasn't diamonds they were smuggling. It was Ecstasy. And these Hasidic Jews--most of whom still prayed morning, noon and night, and some who wouldn't travel carrying their contraband load on Saturday because it was the Sabbath--helped bring almost a million tablets of the illegal drug into the U.S. in less than a year.

The operation, while it lasted, was one of the biggest Ecstasy-smuggling rings in the country, said Assistant U.S. Atty. Linda Lacewell, who is prosecuting the case as it winds to a close in Brooklyn's U.S. District Court. And the federal judge who has overseen the case for the last two years calls it "the most painful" in his 20 years on the bench.

Next month the ringleader, Sean Erez, an Israeli Canadian who had made his home in New York and Amsterdam, will be sentenced in the final chapter of this multi-country saga, which involved both sophisticated drug-smuggling operations and bungling worthy of Hollywood farce.

It began almost exactly three years ago, in October 1998, when Erez, a 31-year-old convicted drug felon, moved to Amsterdam to set up an Ecstasy distribution network.

Why Amsterdam? Because, as a senior Dutch official has said, “Holland is to synthetic drugs what Colombia is to cocaine.” Ecstasy, which is illegal in both the U.S. and the Netherlands, is sold in pill or capsule form and consists of amphetamines and MDMA, a hallucinogen to make users feel high for hours. It is mass-produced in Dutch laboratories in vast quantities for 50 cents to \$2 per pill and at the markup price of up to \$25 in U.S. nightclubs, where it also is known as the “hug drug” because it gives users a sense of well-being and euphoria.

Despite the side effects, which include depression, sleep disorders and memory loss, demand for the drug has escalated dramatically over the last five years, more than for any other controlled substance, according to DEA special agent Robert Gagne.

This ripe market was the perfect opportunity for Erez, a low-level drug dealer who was “going entrepreneurial,” said Gagne, who is based in New York and was involved in the Erez investigation from the beginning. The trick, of course, would be to get the pills past customs officials. In February 1999, Erez and a few of his colleagues came up with an ingenious idea: Recruit sheltered young Orthodox Jews, who had spent most of their lives in religious schools called yeshivas, to serve as drug couriers.

Erez had a perfect in: an Orthodox Jewish associate, Shimon Levita, who was then 17 years old--and willing to sell the plan to his friends.

The two were confident they would find takers. After all, there were bound to be some rebels in the tight-knit Hasidic community, which insulates itself as much as possible from the modern-day world, prohibiting or strictly limiting television, radio and movies, and requiring very modest dress for both men and women.

Levita was promised \$2,000 for every courier he brought in. He soon roped in Simcha Roth, then 18, who helped bring on board others at his yeshiva. Each of the yeshiva boys who joined the ring was offered a \$200 commission for recruiting a friend.

“The brilliance of this conspiracy was the cover story,” Lacewell said. While diamond smuggling is also illegal, it lacked the stigma that goes with the drug trade--and has a history in the community, where there are tales of Jews, forced to flee anti-Semitism in Europe, who hid diamonds and gold in their clothes to help them survive in new lands.

Court documents note that those who later cooperated with authorities acknowledged that “there were warning signs along the way that they were smuggling drugs, [but] they generally closed their eyes to the fact.”

“Even though they knew it was drugs, they could tell themselves it was diamonds. I think if you told them ‘you get \$1,500 for bringing in a bag of drugs,’ they probably wouldn’t do it.”

And Lacewell added, “I should say this--there were plenty of young people who refused” to run the “diamonds.”

Those who did join up, most of them ages 18 to 20, helped turn Erez into a big-time operator. In the year before he set up shop, the period from October 1997 to October 1998, drug authorities at New York’s John F. Kennedy Airport seized about 375,000 Ecstasy pills. From October 1998 to July 1999--at the height of Erez’s operation--more than 1 million pills were found, which at retail could bring in as much as \$25 million.

Erez’s couriers typically smuggled 30,000 to 45,000 Ecstasy pills into the country in each trip, putting them in plastic bags and then in dozens of pairs of white athletic socks. At any one time, three couriers a week were traveling between the Netherlands and the United States with suitcases full of socks, each sock containing up to 1,000 of

the aspirin-sized pills stamped with logos of elephants, Superman or the Chinese yin and yang symbol.

The bags were checked through, and unless they were hand-searched, the smugglers were home free.

Or so they thought. Almost from the get-go, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, Customs Service and the New York City Police Department were on Erez's tail.

"We received information from a confidential source that Sean Erez was getting ready to leave jail [on a 1998 drug conviction] and that it was his intention to travel to the Netherlands to set up his network," said the DEA's Gagne.

So, in what U.S. officials say was a successful new partnership, they began working closely with Dutch investigators, sharing witnesses and evidence, particularly evidence gleaned by listening in on Erez's phone conversations in the Netherlands, where wiretaps are easier to obtain than in the United States, Lacewell said.

They heard how Hasidic couriers would arrive at airports in Brussels or Amsterdam and be given a pager or number and a name such as "Muttu" or "Chaim" to call. They would then go to a hotel, where one of Erez's people would meet them, and often hand over a suitcase full of drugs.

The couriers would take the suitcase to New York, or occasionally Miami, and wait for someone to identify himself using a password such as "Goombah" or "Adidas." Then they'd pass along drugs. Sometimes, they'd also run drug profits back to Europe.

Court documents show that the couriers often were deliberately incurious about the illegal load they were carrying. One smuggler asked his contact why the suitcase was so heavy. "A lot of shoes had been packed," he was told. The discussion stopped there.

The wiretaps also offer a glimpse into an organization that could run to the almost laughably amateur. Those sent to receive the drugs at airports sometimes ran late and missed their arriving contacts. One 18-year-old courier waited to take flights on which he could get student discounts. Wiretapped phone conversations reveal Erez and his lieutenants obsessed with finding cheap plane, train and bus fares as they attempted to sidestep airports and cities they deemed “hot.”

Still, Erez, a dark-haired domineering man whom Gagne describes as “a very good businessman with an outgoing personality,” did a remarkable job of setting up a large drug-smuggling operation in such a short time, Gagne said.

He gave his young recruiters Roth (also known as Moshe and Mutty) and Levita (a.k.a. Mo and Shimi) not just trips to Europe, but a fantasy lifestyle in which they shed their somber Hasidic clothing and reveled in posh hotels and nightclubs. “It was a kind of an Oliver Twist story,” said Chris Franzblau, the lawyer for Roth. “Erez was Fagin.”

Erez (also known as Opher, Shmule and Chaim) encouraged Levita and Roth to enjoy the finer things in life, including their own product--Ecstasy. In the court affidavit, Erez tells Roth that “you got to start trying the little things; you’ll have a better time.”

For five months, the operation seemed to thrive, but in March 1999, it began to fall apart. Two couriers arriving at JFK airport were arrested with 30,000 pills. A month later, Hasidic newlyweds were arrested at Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris with 78,000 Ecstasy tablets.

When the first couriers failed to arrive in Miami, wiretaps show, Erez and his people scrambled to figure out where they went. Did they double-cross Erez and steal the drugs? Or were they caught?

As Roth noted over a wiretapped phone, “Something’s not good.”

At the same time the Paris couriers were arrested, a young Hasidic woman on her way back from Brussels was nabbed at Dorval International Airport in Montreal with 45,000 pills in her suitcase. She said she had planned to take a bus from Montreal to Brooklyn but had waited a day so she did not have to travel on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath.

With those arrests, Erez advised Levita and Roth to flee the U.S. Levita flew to Amsterdam, Roth to Israel. Two months later, in June, the trap closed. Erez and his girlfriend, Dina Reicherter, were arrested at the Amsterdam airport on their way to a vacation in the French Riviera. Levita was also grabbed, as were Erez's distributors in New York and Miami.

Roth and Levita agreed to return to the U.S., where they pleaded guilty to smuggling and helped prosecutors build their case against Erez, who fought extradition. He and Reicherter were finally sent back to the U.S. in February of this year.

Altogether, 18 people pleaded guilty to importing or conspiracy to import Ecstasy. None of those arrested contested the charges.

Sentences have ranged from probation for some of the young couriers to 70 months in jail for one of the distributors. The young Hasidic couple, Eli Freedman and Mikal Ruth Stern, were sentenced to three years in a French jail, where Stern gave birth to their baby.

Erez now sits in a Brooklyn jail. He faces a maximum of 20 years in prison and a \$1-million fine. His lawyer has declined to comment.

U.S. District Court Judge I. Leo Glaser, who has sentenced many of those involved in the case, has continually sounded pained and bewildered by the actions of the young people standing before him.

“I’ve had the misfortune of dealing with this case for the past two years,” Glaser said at Roth’s sentencing in September. “This has without any doubt--and I’ve been sitting in this courtroom for 20 years--been the most painful case I’ve had to deal with.”

Defense lawyers and rabbis tell the judge about redemption and repentance, past good deeds and future good works of the young defendants.

The defendants themselves stand before him, hands clasped in front, clothed in yarmulkes and dark garb. They recount sheltered upbringings that required daily prayers and prohibited television and made them naive and eager for adventure.

“I’m still searching for answers, wondering how I did what I did,” Roth said in court. “I grew up in a very protective environment, and the chance of going to Europe and all that money was like telling a child, ‘Don’t touch a hot stove.’ I just did it without thinking.

“Sean Erez made everything seem so easy. I was living in a fantasy world.”

In his sentencings, Glaser has lambasted the Hasidic community for its apparent inability to watch over its young people--for failing to notice that its own children, some of whom had scarcely ever left New York before, were running drugs around Europe.

“This case has left me sleepless for many, many nights,” Glaser said at Roth’s sentencing. “Not only for Simcha Roth, but for the many other young people garbed in the religious cloak designed to hide their criminal activity.

For the most part, except for court testimony, there has been a resounding silence from the Hasidic neighborhoods. Rabbi Avi Shafran, with Agudath Israel of America in Manhattan, a national group for Orthodox Jews, says the silence is “a feeling of shame.”

“It hurts us very deeply,” he said. “It’s a topic that is being discussed in yeshivas. I don’t think the failure should be racked up to education, but to an individual’s failure to use

their education to avoid temptation.”

“In the end,” he said, “human beings have free will--good on one side, and temptations and evil on the other side.”

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