

The Theft That Cost Jewish Dealers Millions

The \$100 Million Diamond Heist

In 2003, dozens of diamond dealers, including many Jewish ones, were shocked to discover that they had fallen victim to a massive heist. Indeed, it was the greatest diamond robbery in history. The vault where the diamonds were kept was protected by extraordinary security measures and thought to be completely impossible to break into. But now the impossible had been done. Exactly who masterminded the theft and how it was done remains a mystery to this day.

Antwerp's once proud Diamond Center lies at the center of three closely guarded streets. They are surrounded by walls, barricades and surveillance cameras to deter thieves.

Beneath the Diamond Center lies one of the most secure safety vaults anywhere in the world. Two stories below ground and protected by 10 security layers—including cameras, heat shields, radar, motion sensors, magnetic detectors and a double lock with 100 million possible combinations—this vault was believed impossible to break into.

On Monday morning, February 17, 2003, that belief was shattered. The guards arrived at work that day without the slightest inclination that anything was amiss. When they reached the vault, however, they froze. It could not be true. The chamber door—which was one foot thick and made of guaranteed bomb-proof steel—was wide open.

All the protected doors, cameras and locks had failed. No alarm had been sounded—not by the motion sensors, magnetic detectors or the surveillance cameras. Somehow, thieves had outsmarted them all.

One glance inside the vault was enough to establish that most of its 189 safety deposit boxes had been removed and emptied.

Strewn across the white tile floor lay a jumble of diamonds, pearls, gold, silver and cash. The fur-lined jewel cases lay scattered among glistening jewels of every description. The security guards tiptoed among the bars of gold, diamond-studded bracelets and expensive watches. These were the pitiful remnants that were deemed too insignificant for the thieves to bother with.

The bandits had made off that day with no less than \$100 million worth of jewels!

To this day, investigators remain clueless about many aspects of the crime, particularly with regards to how the thieves managed to bypass many of the security safeguards. The

Antwerp Diamond Center heist earned itself the title “Robbery of the Century.” The stolen property has still not been returned to this day.

“Oh no! That’s my box!”

Responsibility for the security vault under the Diamond Center lay in the hands of a special “diamond squad” led by Patrick Peys and Agim De Bruycker, who provided security for the entire diamond district. At the time, 80% of the world’s raw (uncut) diamonds passed through the three square blocks of Antwerp’s diamond district. Police were needed to maintain a 24-hour watch and constant vigilance by means of 63 surveillance cameras.

In 2003 alone, the year of the robbery, \$3 billion worth of jewels exchanged hands. And that includes only the public deals. Many private deals are closed with nothing more than a handshake and do not appear in the statistics. The diamond dealers have been following this tradition for years.

With such fantastic sums passing through, a high level of security is an absolute necessity. In 2000, the Belgian government created a special police unit to keep guard over the area. Peys and De Bruycker were the first officers hired for the job. Now, when they received the first frantic call that fateful Monday morning, the two men raced to the scene immediately.

When the officers reached the lowest floor of the Diamond Center, they were shocked by the unbelievable scene that met their eyes. The two men had handled plenty of brash and daring crimes in their careers, but nothing they had seen even came close to this.

De Bruycker called police headquarters and requested that a national alert be announced to the effect that the diamond district had been robbed. Next he called Securilink, the company that operated the alarm system that protected the vault. “Tell me, what’s the status of the vault’s alarm?”

“Everything is functioning as normal,” came the reply, as the man on the other end of the line scanned the panel before him. “The vault is secure.”

“Then how is it that the door is wide open and I’m standing inside!” De Bruycker spat out these words with barely concealed impatience. He hung up the phone in anger and looked at his colleagues. “How could



The three square blocks of the diamond district are under 24-hour security surveillance. Inset: Diamond cutter examines a gem in Antwerp’s diamond district.

this have happened? No everyday robber could have pulled this off.”

The daily activity in the Diamond Center was beginning and dealers and others who stored their valuables in the vault began to show up. In moments the word spread around the entire district and the lowest floor was crowded with desperate men who came to see the wide open vault with their own eyes. One dealer saw his safety deposit box lying empty on the floor and he shrieked, “Oh no! That’s my box!” He had lost \$1 million in cash. One widow had been left with a veritable treasure in jewels and heirlooms in her deposit box when her husband died. This was supposed to support her for the rest of her life. Now she suddenly found herself penniless.

People who came recounted to the police of the innumerable treasures and irreplaceable personal valuables that had been stored in that vault. Everything was gone. The victims burst into tears; the work of their entire lives had disappeared overnight. But the police just stood there helplessly. Everything was gone and considering how advanced the thieves must have been they saw very little hope of ever retrieving anything.

Theft Capital

In the summer of 2001, about 18 months before the heist, Leonardo Notarbartolo sat in a coffeehouse on Hoveniersstraat, the main street in Antwerp’s diamond district, sipping his cup of coffee. It was a small establishment with just a few tables, but through a window he could observe much of the world’s diamond trade.

Millions of dollars’ worth of diamonds passed by this window every day, sometimes in small, black cloth sacks or in discreet boxes. Armored cars pulled up, their guards standing with guns at the ready. Non-Jewish, Jewish and Chassidic brokers alike rushed by, their attaché cases bound to their hands with chains. At night, when the district died down, the mind-boggling wealth was carefully locked away in the underground chamber. As much as \$20 billion passed through these streets each year.

In 2000, Notarbartolo had rented a small office in one of the largest buildings in the Diamond Center. He posed as a diamond importer whose business was based in Turin, Italy, and he met with many local dealers. He dressed well and paid in cash for the stones he purchased. He also tried to sprinkle his