

Crime Ring Suspected in Murder, Thefts: Law enforcement: Police have ...

PHIL SNEIDERMAN TIMES STAFF WRITER

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pg. GDJ1

Crime Ring Suspected in Murder, Thefts

■ **Law enforcement:** Police have few leads in the murder of an Oriental rug expert and five home robberies, but suspect that an organized ethnic group is involved. All the victims were of Armenian ancestry.

By PHIL SNEIDERMAN
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Glendale police are investigating whether an ethnic element links the murder of a Hollywood Oriental rug expert and five carefully planned residential robberies, all during the past six months.

The victims were all of Armenian ancestry, and police suspect that an Armenian ring set up or committed the crimes.

"I'm convinced there's a group out there responsible for the robberies and possibly the homicide," Detective John McKillop said. "It appears there is some organization to

it. . . . It appears that they do research on their subjects and then follow up on it with threats.

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The most serious of the crimes was the shooting death of Adeline Ouzounian, 64, whose body was dumped in Glendale. Her family has offered a \$25,000 reward for

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Glendale police detective

information leading to the conviction of her killer or killers.

But so far, police have few leads.

Ouzounian's relatives believe that people are keeping quiet because they fear the criminals.

"These people are animals," said one relative who was

afraid to be identified.

The family member said rumors are rampant in the Armenian community, particularly among those in the Oriental rug business, about the existence of a crime ring.

"I hear that among this ring is a former KGB agent who advises them how to pull the tricks and burglaries," he said. "If they get to grow, we'll be going back to the 1930s—like the Al Capone days."

But Armenian leaders in Glendale—one of the nation's largest Armenian communities with a population estimated at 35,000—downplay such talk.

In interviews, some said they had never heard of such a crime ring, and others suggested that Ouzounian's relatives, in their grief, may have exaggerated rumors.

Arick Gevorkian, chairman of the Armenian National Committee's Glendale chapter, said such reports about crime in the community "ruin the reputation that we've been working to build up. We're worried about these crimes happening to Armenians and about the reputation of the Armenian community."

Harut Sassounian, publisher of the Glendale-based California Courier, a weekly Armenian newspaper, said he

Please see CRIME, J5

CRIME

Continued from J1

has heard no reports about a crime ring, but if one exists in the community, it would be "natural that criminals will operate in areas they know something about. If they're from an ethnic circle, they may rob people of that same ethnic circle."

The most recent incident occurred Oct. 14, when three men who said they were delivering a package talked their way into an Armenian family's house on Emerald Isle Drive in an affluent area of Glendale.

The intruders, who brandished firearms, tied up a 9-year-old girl and placed her in a laundry room. Then they forced her father to hand over about \$40,000 worth of jewelry, police said.

McKillop believes that there is a connection between the holdup and four similar residential robberies in the city, all involving Armenian victims:

■ On May 7, two men entered an apartment in the 1100 block of Thompson Avenue, pistol-whipped and tied up the 80-year-old resident, then stole four Oriental rugs and jewelry, all valued at about \$30,000.

■ On July 18, three gunmen used a telephone cord to tie up a 58-year-old homemaker in her home the 3000 block of East Chevy Chase Drive. They used a truck to haul away antiques, jewelry and other valuables. The loss was estimated at about \$50,000.

■ On Aug. 2, two gunmen entered a house in the 3300 block of Sparr Boulevard and stole about \$2,000 in cash and jewelry from a man and woman in their 60s.

■ On Sept. 23, three men dressed as a deliveryman and house painters talked their way into a home in the 1600 block of Glenwood Road. They displayed guns, tied up five adults, put tape over the eyes of two children and demanded a specific piece of jewelry.

A neighbor spotted the suspicious activity and called police, who arrived before the robbery was completed. Officers captured one of the fleeing suspects, Curtis Black, 31, of Los Angeles. He has been ordered to stand trial on five counts of robbery.

The two other men stole a car at gunpoint and escaped, along with another man and woman who police say were lookouts.

After the first three incidents, in which the robbers were believed to be of Armenian descent, Glendale police issued a warning through the Armenian news media.

But in the two most recent incidents, the robbers were described as black or Latino. McKillop said it is possible those behind the crimes hired people from other ethnic backgrounds "to throw off the connection."

But the detective said the tactics of knowing family members' names and the valuables they own have remained the same.

Working with what sketchy details they have, Glendale police are trying to determine whether the people behind the robberies also

killed Adeline Ouzounian.

The native of Syria, moved to Southern California in 1964 and found work repairing antique Oriental rugs. Family members say Ouzounian was in demand for her skills. In recent years, however, as her eyesight weakened, she became a specialist in dyeing yarn used in the repair of antique rugs.

Ouzounian also bought and sold Oriental rugs out of her apartment in a building she owned with one of her brothers in the 1000 block of North Normandie Avenue in Hollywood, which has an Armenian population estimated at 30,000. Family members say she was negotiating a rug transaction at the time she disappeared.

On July 26, Ouzounian, who did not drive, was seen leaving her apartment on foot at night, something she rarely did because of crime in the area. Apparently, she was on her way to meet someone, relatives said.

"We have very strong feelings that it was somebody that she dealt with an awful lot and who gained her trust," said one family member. "Usually, if she didn't trust people, she wouldn't have gone out late at night to buy or sell a carpet."

When she failed to return, relatives informed Los Angeles police. On the night Ouzounian disappeared, family members said, someone broke into her apartment and stole her Oriental rugs, valued at more than \$100,000.

On Sept. 9, a bicyclist in Glendale's remote Scholl Canyon area found the remains of a body wrapped in cloth.

"The body appeared to have been dragged down the hill about 50 to 100 feet, and there was brush covering the body," McKillop said. "Chances are it could have gone undetected for a long time."

Investigators eventually linked the body to the missing person report. Family members identified Ouzounian through her handmade clothing and a unique piece of jewelry found on the body. Police declined to discuss the type of gun used, or where and how many times she was shot.

"I can tell you it was a brutal killing," McKillop said.