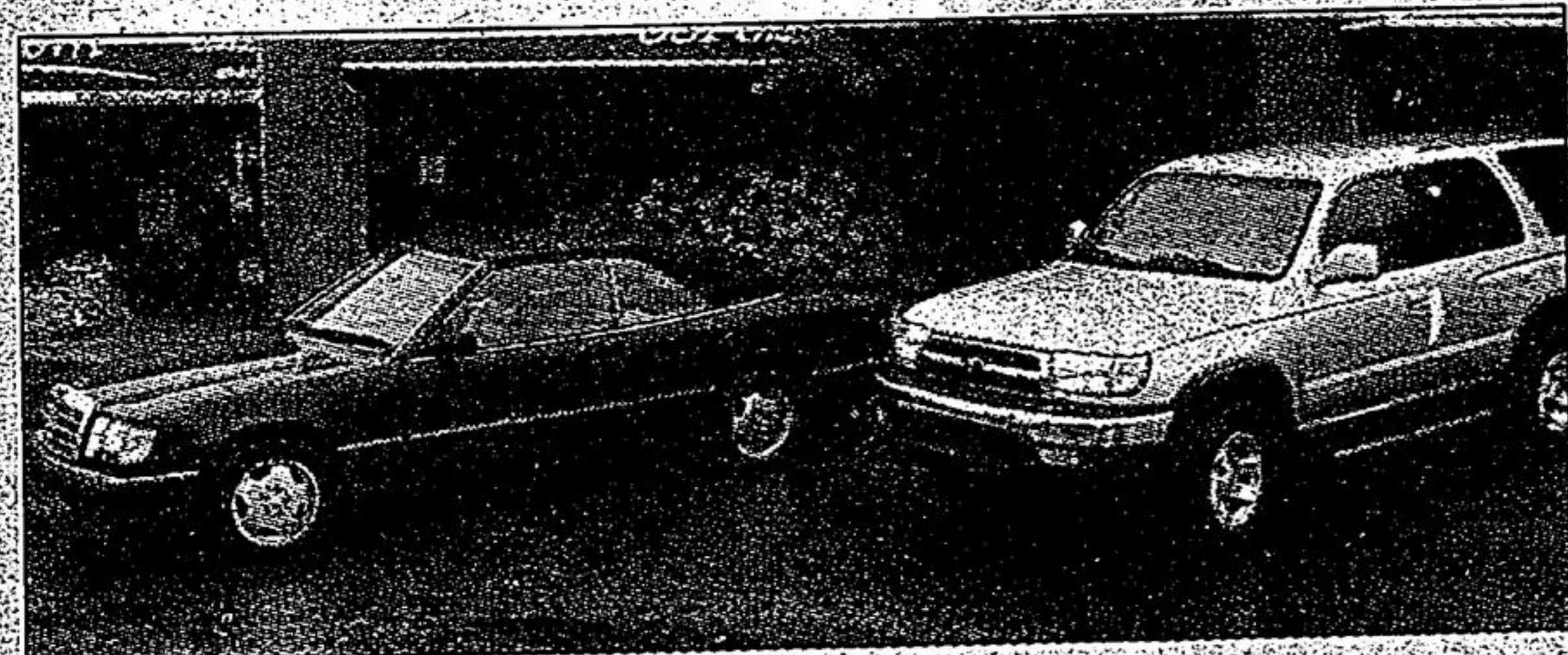


Killers staked out store before slaying, cops say



Tziv Erez (left) and Hila Erez, the brother and sister of murder victim Niv Erez join police at the a press conference at the East Beaver Creek Drive site of the botched jewelry heist that ended in the death of the 23-year-old man. (Below) Police say vehicles similar to these were used in the Jan. 16 crime.



BY PATRICK CASEY
Staff Writer

Five months after a botched robbery left a Thornhill man dead and his jewelry store boss seriously wounded, York Regional Police are asking the public to help identify the occupants of two vehicles used to observe the Richmond Hill store weeks before the holdup.

On Tuesday, police detectives said interviews with 150 witnesses have determined at least two people had M. Lash Enterprises under surveillance for the first two weeks of January leading up to the violent robbery attempt on Sunday Jan. 16.

While making final preparations to move the high-end jewelry store from its unit #18 location at 155 East Beaver Creek Rd. to a new outlet store just minutes away, store owner Mark Lash and 23-year-old employee Niv Erez were startled by two men who crashed through the drop ceiling after entering the store through a rooftop heating and air conditioning unit.

Both suspects were armed with handguns and wore balaclavas and, after a brief struggle that included a panic alarm being triggered, a number of shots were fired and Erez was murdered by a gun blast to his torso.

The 36-year-old Lash was shot in the stomach but has since recovered.

Confirming no property was stolen in the attack just moments before midnight, homicide squad Det. Steve Rowbotton released descriptions of the two vehicles involved in the "organized" robbery attempt and believes there could have been one or more people waiting outside the building, acting as lookouts.

The first vehicle is described as a 1993 to 1995 Mercedes Benz, silver or grey two-door convertible,

model E32. The other vehicle identified is a grey or brown 1997 to 1999 Toyota 4-Runner sport utility vehicle.

"The premises were under surveillance for a period of time. We feel they were very organized with the surveillance, watching the place," said Rowbotton, who was joined by Erez's brother Tziv and sister Hila during the morning news conference held at the back door of the former jewelry store.

Vehicles matching the description of the two cars were parked outside the store's front entrance.

"This was robbery motivated, but people got away with no property," said Rowbotton. "They were waiting here for them to assist turning off the alarms. I don't know that we will ever know for sure how it escalated, but a life-and-death struggle ensued. We are now analysing the scientific evidence."

"We don't believe they were stolen vehicles, they had been here before. These were nice vehicles they were driving."

Although reluctant to disclose all the evidence they have gathered to date, including the calibre of handguns used in the attack, Rowbotton said police have no direct evidence linking any inside information was provided to the suspects concerning the store's layout, or the fact jewelry was being readied for shipment to the firm's new Leslie Street location.

Lash has recovered from his physical injuries, added Rowbotton, but now "lives his life in fear" because of the robbery attempt that left his young employee dead.

Meanwhile, Tziv Erez urged anyone with information about the robbery to step forward and share any details with police.

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