

# VANITY FAIR

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whodunnit?

## Death in Monaco

The official explanation for the death of multibillionaire banker Edmond Safra, who was asphyxiated a year ago in a locked bathroom of his Monte Carlo penthouse, is that one of Safra's nurses set the fire in order to heroically rescue his employer. But why was the banker without his Mossad-trained guards? If reports of a second fire are true, who lit it? And were there two bullets in Safra's body? With an ear to the jet-set whispers, and an eye on the feud between Safra's brothers and his widow, Lily, the author explores the Riviera's dangerous mystery.

by Dominick Dunne

On December 3, 1999, in Monte Carlo, Monaco, the multibillionaire banker Edmond J. Safra, along with one of his nurses, died of asphyxiation in a locked, bunker-like bathroom in a conflagration that engulfed his magnificent duplex penthouse, atop a building housing the Republic National Bank of New York, which he had made final arrangements to sell a few days previously. Early accounts said that two hooded intruders had penetrated the apartment, which was as solid as a fortress, and stabbed a male nurse. The bizarre death made headlines everywhere and sent shock waves through the banking community, as well as through the principality of Monaco, probably the safest, most tightly controlled tax haven in the world for the very rich. There is one policeman for every 100 of its 30,000 inhabitants. You can barely take a step in Monte Carlo without being monitored by closed-circuit cameras, which are on the streets, in underpasses, in the halls of hotels, and in the casino. Three days after Safra's death, Daniel Serdet, the attorney general and chief prosecutor of Monaco, announced that a male nurse named Ted Maher, from Stormville, New York, had confessed to setting the blaze that killed his employer in order to win favor with the banker. Serdet said that Maher had started a fire in a wastebasket in an effort to draw attention to himself. "He wanted to be a hero," Serdet said. There were no hooded intruders, and the stab wounds in Maher's abdomen and thigh were self-inflicted. Serdet released a statement to the press about Maher, saying that at the time of the fire he was highly agitated, "psychologically fragile and under the influence of medication." Serdet concluded, "From this moment on we can exclude with certainty all [conjectures] of any international conspiracy." Marc Bonnant, the lawyer for Safra's widow, announced in *Time* magazine, "The fact that Maher is unstable became apparent to us only after the accident." The damnation of Ted Maher, the low man on the nursing staff's totem pole, had begun. In no time the case had been all tied up with a neat bow: the guilty party was in custody, and the principality of Monaco was safe again.



From the beginning, very few people believed that the story was as simple as that. It seemed too pat, too quickly resolved. "Monaco wants it all hushed up," observers said. "The Russian Mafia," some suggested. Others whispered, "Palestinian terrorists." Although the Safra name is little known to the public at large, it is very prominent in the worlds of international banking, philanthropy, and society. Several financiers have described Safra to me as the most brilliant banker of his time. At any moment during the catastrophe he might have saved himself, but he was reportedly so fearful of being murdered by the intruders he had been told were in his house that he refused to come out of the locked bathroom, in spite of the pleas of firemen and police. He put wet towels along the bottom of the bathroom door, but to no avail. When rescuers finally got into the bathroom two hours later, they found the billionaire dead, his body blackened with soot, his skin incinerated. His eyes had popped out of his head. Nearby was a cell phone, on which several calls had been made. Dead along with Safra was one of his eight nurses, Vivian Torrente, an American of Philippine origin. She also had a cell phone, which Ted Maher had given her to call for help.

So far it has not been reported that Torrente's neck was allegedly crushed.

One thing is certain: Edmond Safra, whose specialty was private banking for wealthy clients and who was said to know "all the secrets of the financial planet," had his enemies. Although he pursued an image of great respectability among the very wealthy and powerful, a taint of scandal and suspicion dogged him. He was accused of having laundered money for Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega, as well as for the Colombian drug cartels. And both his bank and his private jet were alleged to have been pressed into service to move money and personnel during the Iran-contra scandal. The rumors of Safra's involvement were found to have been part of a smear campaign by American Express, and Safra ultimately won a public apology and an \$8 million settlement, which he donated to charity. Nevertheless, his closest friend in New York has been quoted as saying, "Edmond was no choirboy."

**A**nother certainty is that Safra was obsessed with security. It was widely reported that he felt menaced, and considered himself a hunted man. Even before collaborating with the F.B.I. in 1998 and 1999 to expose the Russian Mafia's international money-laundering operation, he was apprehensive for his safety. He spent millions each year on security for himself and his wife, her children, and her grandchildren. At each of his many residences he lived virtually surrounded by a private army. The penthouse over his bank had been rebuilt to accommodate the latest surveillance cameras and security devices. He had 11 bodyguards with machine guns, many of them veterans of the Mossad in Israel, who worked in shifts and were always with him, often to the consternation of friends who disliked being surrounded by armed men every time they arrived for a visit. One of the great mysteries of the case is that not one of the guards was on duty the night Safra died. They had been dispatched to La Leopolda, the Safra estate at Villefranche-sur-Mer, 20 minutes from Monte Carlo, one of the great showplaces on the Riviera. The unanswered, or inadequately answered, question is: *Why* weren't any guards in the penthouse at the time of Safra's death, doing what they were trained to do, protecting the life of one of the world's wealthiest men?

Conflicting stories of Safra's last days circulated in the European press. The Italian newspaper *La Stampa* reported that he had been seen at Cap d'Antibes with Boris Berezovsky, the Russian oligarch implicated in the 1999 Aeroflot scandal, in which tens of millions of dollars were alleged to have been diverted from the state-controlled airline. *La Stampa* reported that Safra was also seen at the restaurant of the Hotel Martinez in Cannes in the company of two other Russians, with whom he had quarreled before leaving angrily. People close to Safra dismiss such stories out of hand, saying that he was too ill and too medicated to have been at either place. The 67-year-old Safra suffered from an advanced case of Parkinson's disease—he had donated \$50 million to create a new foundation for medical research on it. In the last year of his life, several of his visitors remarked to me, he was often paranoid and delirious, which they attributed to his heavy medication. In addition to eight nurses, including Ted Maher, four doctors were on call around the clock. By the time of the fire, Maher had been in Safra's employ for just under four months. The French magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur* quoted an anonymous Monegasque attorney as saying, "Safra denounced the Russian Mafia, and some of his clients who were concerned by that could have become afraid and used Maher.... It wouldn't be the first time a poor soul was used in the service of a grand criminal scheme."

**I**n Stormville, New York, which is a two-hour drive from my house in northeastern Connecticut, I meet up with Ted Maher's wife, Heidi, who is 30 and also a nurse, currently working overtime to support their three children. Without Ted's income, she has had to give up their house and move in with her mother and father. "The kids miss that house," Ted's sister, Tammy, tells me when she drives me by the place, which is comfortable-looking and sits in a sylvan glade. Heidi's parents' house is small and a little crowded, what with four extra people living in it, and with Ted's sister and Heidi's brother stopping by all the time to find out the latest about Ted, whom they all love. Heidi's mother, Joan Wustrau, looks after the kids when Heidi is working. The strain Heidi is under shows on her face as she pulls pictures and letters out of a large box to show me.

"Ted wasn't supposed to be on duty that night," she says. "Someone changed the schedule at the last minute, and they put Ted on." She tells me that Ted was about to resign from his job with Safra so that he could return to his family in Stormville and his job at Columbia

Presbyterian Medical Center. She says she heard the news from Tammy (who had heard it on television) that Edmond Safra and a nurse had died in a fire in Monte Carlo. Heidi at first assumed that the dead nurse was Ted.

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