The Private World of a Private Eye

By Julie Smith

Everybody knows about private eyes. They get shot at, romance beautiful girls, collect handsome fees and always catch the guy who did it — meanwhile, making the fuzzer look pretty foolish.

They come in all sorts of variations. Some are cerebral Sherlock Holmes types; some, like Nero Wolfe, are fat and slightly eccentric, many, the image dictates, are tough like Philip Marlowe. But some are just guys who run the family business — like William Gurvich of New Orleans.

The Brothers Gurvich — William, Louis, and Leonard — run the investigative and patrol service started 25 years ago by their father, a retired FBI agent. Number two son William heads the investigative operation, and has never, he says, had a gun pointed at him or a knife thrown his way in his 20 years experience.

Shunning the tough guy image, Gurvich says, "Being uncouth or impertinent doesn't impress me. — I even say "sir" to criminals I apprehend. Our relationship with the police department is excellent, by the way, and most lady clients have varicose veins."

Hmmm — can it be sleuthing isn't all that swashbuckling after all? Well, like anything else it has its moments. "Though we've had at least one of every kind of case, the police handle, we don't get too many murder cases. My most exciting case was a murder conspiracy," the detective said.

I received a call from an ex-con who said he had been contacted by a Fort Worth man and asked either to kill another Texan or find someone who would. I told my contact to tell the man he had a killer lined up. "Using the name Black, I set up a rendezvous with my client in a Fort Worth room which had been bugged by police. The conversation was taped and as we left the room, three Fort Worth detectives nabbed the man."

The case received front page play both in New Orleans and Fort Worth. Though Gurvich's travel expenses were paid by the city of Fort Worth, he received nothing else for his services.

"Another time," he reminisced, "someone came to me with a story about an overheard conversation between two men who claimed to have killed the girl they were traveling with. I called the police, and since the slaying was supposed to have taken place in Arizona, they relayed the information to the authorities there."

"It was a very interesting case because they found a corpse, but it wasn't the same girl they two killed. That one later turned up, but as far as I know the mystery of the extra body has never been solved."

Information like that pertaining to the overheard conversation comes from informers, whether paid or not. "All investigators have them," Gurvich says. "Paid informers are usually ex-convicts, and often they're still involved in criminal activities. Sometimes, of course, they don't tell the whole story and it's up to me to evaluate the information."

Evaluating is one of the keys to effective gumshoeing, in the sleuth's opinion. A good mechanical evaluator is the polygraph machine, or lie detector. "Many firms use the lie detector in choosing their employees," says the tall, gray-haired detective. "If you ask if the subject has ever stolen any money, and the reaction is positive, then chances are he's not a good risk."

The Gurvich firm is retained by many large companies who want internal security. "If more companies would check the people they hire at the outset for just a few dollars, they could save a lot of money in the long run," Gurvich believes.

Fingerprinting is one way to check, and Gurvich is an expert self-taught fingerprinter. A portable fingerprint kit takes care of most routine work, but fluorescent powders can be dusted on cash boxes or doorknobs if foul play is suspected. The powder is invisible but glows under ultraviolet light so it can be detected only by specially trained fingers.

Gurvich is also a self-taught camera expert. In fact, the police department often borrows his extensive photographic and electronic equipment. "I use small movie cameras, a telephoto lens, and infrared bulbs like a bit," he says.

Though Gurvich uses radio devices and "bugs," like tiny transmitters which can be secreted in a car, he applies them only in criminal cases where there is no question of invasion of privacy.

"If an employee is suspected of stealing a company's merchandise, we can put a transmitter in his delivery truck and follow it in a car which contains a receiver. It's the company's car and we've never caught anything. But if it's on the other hand, we turn down companies who want their board meetings bugged."

The Gurvich firm takes no divorce cases — criminal cases are their specialty, though domestic work ordinarily comprises most of a detective agency's business. Not all detective work, however, is outright sleuthing — some of it is plain research. Investigative work for authors is up a detective's alley, and Gurvich once helped research a book for William Bradford Hulse.

An unappealing aspect of the work is that "you don't always see the bright side of life," the detective said. "Sometimes children are involved and narcotics or immorality may play a part. As a matter of fact, narcotics have been involved in most of my cases."

"Although the police could handle a lot of cases we take, people come to us because they don't want the publicity of a police investigation. We don't take cases if there's not a legitimate reason for the investigation. The father of a young girl who had been killed in a accident wanted me to look into it. But I thought he wasn't nearly so interested in his daughter's death as he was in the money he could get out of it, so I didn't take the case."

Aside from photography, radio, fingerprinting, marksmanship and the like, should a private eye have any special training? "I haven't missed a conference of the Louisiana Peace Officers Association since 1948," Gurvich said. "And last October I went to the International Chiefs of Police Conference. I get invited annually to FBI seminars also."