

El Chapo Gives Up Public Defenders and Hires a Private Lawyer

By Alan Feuer

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Giving up his taxpayer-funded public defenders, Joaquín Guzmán Loera, the Mexican drug lord best known as El Chapo, has hired a private lawyer: Jeffrey Lichtman, a combative legal defense specialist who is himself best known for keeping the Mafia scion, John Gotti Jr., out of prison at a trial 12 years ago.

While traveling in Israel on Tuesday, Mr. Lichtman confirmed in an email that he had been retained by Mr. Guzmán, whom he will now defend against a sprawling international conspiracy indictment that was filed against him in January by federal prosecutors in Brooklyn. In a brief phone interview, Mr. Lichtman said he had taken the case with three other lawyers: Marc Fernich, who helped him successfully defend Mr. Gotti against racketeering charges in 2005; A. Eduardo Balarezo, who represented one of Mr. Guzmán's chief rivals, the Mexican trafficker Alfredo Beltrán Leyva; and William Purpura, a lawyer for the notorious Baltimore drug kingpin Richard Anthony Wilford.

The task of defending Mr. Guzmán, who stands accused by the government of killing thousands of people and smuggling tons of drugs into the United States in a rotating fleet of planes, yachts, fishing boats and submersibles, is likely to be the challenge of Mr. Lichtman's legal career. After all, before he was extradited to Brooklyn this winter, Mr. Guzmán was convicted of drug trafficking charges in Mexico and twice served time in — and twice escaped from — high-security prisons in his homeland. While he was on the run last year, he also gave an interview to the actor Sean Penn for Rolling Stone magazine — “El Chapo Speaks” — in which he proudly stated: “I supply more heroin, methamphetamine, cocaine and marijuana than anybody else in the world.”



Jeffrey Lichtman, who defended John Gotti Jr. on racketeering charges in 2005, was hired by Joaquín Guzmán Loera. G. Paul Burnett/The New York Times

Mr. Lichtman suggested that what seemed to be a confession by his client might not be entirely relevant to the charges Mr. Guzmán faces in Brooklyn.

“The man has been convicted in the court of public opinion times 100, but it doesn’t mean he’s guilty of the crimes that he’s been charged with,” Mr. Lichtman said. “Whatever he said to Sean Penn, I don’t know that it suggests he did anything wrong in the Eastern District of New York.”

Though Mr. Lichtman said he had already met with Mr. Guzmán on numerous occasions, he has not yet filed an official notice of appearance in Federal District Court in Brooklyn. That is because, as part of its case, the government is seeking to seize from Mr. Guzmán \$14 billion in alleged drug profits. Given that the forfeiture claim could easily impoverish his client, Mr. Lichtman is naturally concerned about getting paid. But he said that he is also concerned about Mr. Guzmán who, since arriving in New York, has been held in severe confinement in the ultra-secure solitary wing of Manhattan’s federal jail.

“The conditions he’s been suffering under since January are the most horrific I’ve ever seen — terrorists at Guantánamo Bay have it easier than this guy does,” Mr. Lichtman said. “It’s easy to just bury him, but he’s still a human being and still deserves his rights.”

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