

Yeshiva grad: My Nazi stuff got me jailed

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A former Yeshiva student charged with illegally hoarding weapons said he was wrongly targeted because of his interest in Nazi souvenirs, but police call him "dangerous and sick."

"I'm a historian. I studied World War II quite extensively," said Michael Kneitel, 39, a graduate of the Yeshiva of Flatbush who has been behind bars at Rikers Island since March. "You couldn't be in that school without hearing about the Holocaust. I decided to do some research on my own as to why something like that happened."

That harmless quest, he added, led to the lucrative world of buying and selling outdated guns and Nazi souvenirs — and eventually to cops' finding 20 firearms in his home and a storage facility.

Kneitel, a mechanic from Borough Park, said his error was getting into an "altercation" with an off-duty officer on March 1 at Gateway National Park. The cop said he stumbled upon Kneitel shooting at a photo of his mother-in-law.

Detective Michael Danchuk said he was jogging when he heard gunshots and found Kneitel armed with a .380-caliber pistol. He said Kneitel pointed the gun at him and refused to turn it over. Danchuk called 911.

Police then seized an arsenal allegedly belonging to Kneitel that they displayed at a news conference. In addition to a loaded Tec-9 assault rifle found at his home, police seized an Uzi submachine gun, an AK-47 assault rifle, an Uzi carbine, SS flags, a Nazi uniform and thousands of rounds of ammunition at a Bath Beach storage facility. Also on view were photos of Kneitel dressed in a Nazi uniform.



Michael Kneitel

Kneitel faces multiple felony counts of criminal possession of weapons, reckless endangerment, menacing and endangering the welfare of a child for taking a photo of his 6-month-old daughter dressed in Nazi garb and holding a gun.

He was originally held without bail, but a judge subsequently set bail at \$30,000, which Kneitel says he cannot afford, so he has stayed at Rikers Island. He spends most of his days in the law library and attends Jewish religious services every week.

Prosecutors say he could face anywhere from 3½ to 25 years in prison. Police Commissioner Bernard Kerik branded Kneitel an "extremely dangerous and sick man."

Kneitel says he is a history buff who was studying political science at Brooklyn College and planning to attend law school.

He said his illegally obtained weapons and Nazi souvenirs were never meant to leave his home, nor did his parents — whose families escaped Nazi Germany — know of his hobby. "I collected as an investment," he said. "I never publicly went out in that uniform the police confiscated. It's not something someone would be proud of. It was a very private thing."

Having heard so much of the terror wreaked by the Nazis, he was drawn to collect items to recapture history — and make money, he said.

"To actually hold something in your hand of that era, you could feel the history behind it," he said. "That was sort of a gratification. It was a learning experience. You can see the terror and the power that something like that exudes. It is overpowering."