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After 23 Years, Fugitive Wanted for Child Sex-Abuse in Brooklyn's Orthodox Community Faces Extradition from Israel

The news this past October that Brooklyn District Attorney Charles "Joe" Hynes finally revived the case against fugitive Avrohom Mondrowitz—when the Israeli government received a new extradition request for Mr. Mondrowitz, on child sex abuse charges dating back to 1984—marked a huge turning point for child advocates like Dr. Amy Neustein.

"When I first started discussing Mondrowitz 20 years ago," remembers Dr. Neustein, a child abuse expert who grew up in Brooklyn's Orthodox community, "I was almost the only one in my religious circles who was talking about the case. It was not something people wanted to publicize."

Between the late 1970s and the end of 1984—when he fled Brooklyn for Israel—Mr. Mondrowitz, a popular child counselor and school administrator in Borough Park's Orthodox community, is believed by police to have sexually abused as many as hundreds of young children, nearly all of them from the Orthodox-Jewish community in Borough Park. But in those days, the community was unprepared to deal with the issue.

Not a Rabbi

Although Mr. Mondrowitz identifies as a rabbi, researchers say there is no indication that he actually ever received *smicha* or ordination

of any kind. He is a member of the Ger chassidic sect.

An arrest warrant was issued for Mr. Mondrowitz in November 1984 on charges of sexually abusing four boys, but he fled the country and soon reappeared in Jerusalem, Israel, where Mr. Mondrowitz, now 60, still resides.



Avroham Modrowitz

According to the *Jerusalem Post*, he was born in 1947 in Tel Aviv and later moved with his family to Chicago. He arrived in Brooklyn in the late 1970s and presented himself to Orthodox educational institutions as a rabbi and clinical psychologist.

Political Decision?

Although former Brooklyn DA Elizabeth Holtzman tried for years to extradite Mr. Mondrowitz, Mr. Hynes, who replaced her, seems never even to have attempted it.

Critics accuse Mr. Hynes, who took office in 1989, of re-

fusing to go after Mr. Mondrowitz because, they say, the Orthodox community in Brooklyn had a vested interest in keeping the story quiet, and Mr. Hynes did not want to ruffle the feathers of that voting bloc. He had been elected in 1989 with strong Orthodox support and, after his election, he appointed a virtually all-Orthodox Jewish Advisory Council, who advice he seems to take very seriously.

In September 1993, Mr. Hynes instructed the federal government to close its file on Mr. Mondrowitz. Mr. Hynes said he would not pursue the case while the accused pedophile remained in Israel.

Faulty Laws

According to Mr. Hynes, however, his failure to press for Mr. Mondrowitz's return was based on the fact that the laws in Israel at the time recognized rape—and would have allowed the extradition of an indicted rapist back to the US—but not homosexual pedophilia. According to Mr. Hynes, because there was no law in Israel to cover Mr. Mondrowitz's crime, the courts in the Jewish state would not extradite him, and the Brooklyn DA did not, therefore, pursue it, he says.

Mr. Hynes's spokesman, Jerry Schmetterer, denies that the DA's office was influenced by Jewish interests. "That had no impact on our decision to

act now," he said, explaining that an amendment to the extradition treaty between Israel and the US has allowed Mr. Hynes to act now.

Among those who do not accept Mr. Hynes's explanation is NY Democratic State Assemblyman Dov Hinkind. "I want to know how many Jewish children may have been molested in Israel because the Brooklyn DA didn't do his duty. The pain of any child who was hurt by Mondrowitz in Israel is on Hynes's head," said Mr. Hinkind. "Where was the DA?"

The Community

An equally valid question seems to be: Where was the community?

Detective Pat Kehoe, who handled the case for the NYPD, recently told ABC's Nightline that the Brooklyn police had little cooperation from the Orthodox community.

According to Ms. Kehoe, Orthodox-Jewish sex-abuse victims and their families felt there was "a very large stigma that prevents them from getting married and going forward with their lives if this is ever found out."

Ms. Kehoe, who had a background in an NYPD pedophilia squad, was alerted to Mr. Mondrowitz's activities by an anonymous call, naming the rabbi who, the caller said, was abusing people on

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his block in Borough Park.

Bikes and Trips

Ms. Kehoe and her partner went to the neighborhood, where, she said, Italians and chassidic Jews lived side-by-side. At one of the first addresses they tried, a resident told her, "Everyone knows Rabbi Mondrowitz. He's good to all our children. He buys them bi-

Clear Abuse

According to Ms. Kehoe, the children painted a clear picture of sexual abuse, reporting that the rabbi had fondled them, had sexual relations with them, and had fondled others in front of them.

When Ms. Kehoe and her partner obtained a search warrant for the Mondrowitz

ish families chose to be part of the official process.

Whose Decision?

Mr. Hikind argued that the Jewish community's degree of comfort with the case should not have influenced Mr. Hynes's decision to seek Mr. Mondrowitz's extradition.

"The guy clearly did bad things. He was indicted, and

quiet neighborhood in Jerusalem with his name prominently displayed on a mailbox.

19 Years Late

Michael Leshner is a Pas-saic-based attorney and writer who represents several Orthodox men who, in the last year and a half, have come forward to accuse Mr. Mondrowitz of abusing them as children. Mr.



Assemblyman Dov Hikind

cycles and takes them away on weekends and things."

Ms. Kehoe's antennae went up. "Pedophiles have a pattern with children to get their confidence and send their so-called love, you might say, and buy them things," she says.

When she interviewed the children, her suspicions were confirmed. They told her, "The rabbi is our friend. He takes us away," but when the questions became more difficult for the children—"Did anything sexual ever happen? Are you aware of it happening to anyone else while you were there"—the children "broke down and cried, each one separately," she says.

home, there was no answer at the door, so they climbed through the basement window. Mr. Mondrowitz and his family had fled and his house was completely empty, except for hundreds of files on Orthodox boys whom Mr. Mondrowitz had been counseling in his basement office.

But when Ms. Kehoe tried to talk to the boys' families, she was met by a wall of silence. She said it was four of "Rabbi Mondrowitz's" non-Jewish, Italian victims, ages 11-16, who ultimately spoke to the police and provided the basis for his indictment on multiple counts of first-degree sodomy and first-degree child abuse. No Jew-

"I want to know how many Jewish children may have been molested in Israel because the Brooklyn DA didn't do his duty. The pain of any child who was hurt by Mondrowitz in Israel is on Hynes's head. Where was the DA? The guy clearly did bad things. He was indicted, and he ran away. It doesn't matter what the community had to say about it, he should have been brought back to face the music. There's been a lack of justice for the victims and their families. It's time that was ended."

he ran away. If you're innocent, you don't run; you stay and fight to clear your name. It doesn't matter what the community had to say about it, he should have been brought back to face the music," said Mr. Hikind.

Asked about Mr. Hikind's concern about the number of potential victims Mr. Mondrowitz might have preyed on in Israel, Ms. Kehoe said "Hundreds, I'm sure."

"He's been in Israel more than 20 years. It's a sickness. It's something that you have to do every time when you find a new victim," she said.

For a story on this case last year, ABC News found Mr. Mondrowitz living in a

Leshner acknowledges that, in 1984, Israel's extradition treaty with the US did not apply to the rape of boys.

"But Israeli law changed in 1988, equating sodomy with rape, which should have paved the way for Mondrowitz's extradition to New York," says Mr. Leshner.

Instead, it took another 19 years of political and behind-the-scenes activism before American officials actually asked Israel to send Mr. Mondrowitz back to face his accusers in a court of law.

Passion for Justice

Mr. Leshner credits Dr. Neustein, an Edgewater-based writer and sociologist, with having introduced him to the

case in 1997, after which, he admits, it became “a passion.” Over the years, Dr. Neustein and Mr. Leshner have collaborated on articles and other materials dealing with the issue.

“I spent over two years on FOIA [Freedom of Information Act] requests and appeals. What was finally revealed was that the case was stalled. Not because of any legal barrier. It was stalled because no one wanted to push it forward,” he says. “It just haunted me. How could anyone do such things and then just spend the rest of his life living quietly, openly, in a religious community in Jerusalem?”

Several years ago, Mr. Leshner went so far as to start an email correspondence with Mr. Mondrowitz, who abruptly put an end to the exchange when Mr. Leshner’s questions became too specific.

But before the correspondence stopped, in an email dated February 20, 2003, Mr. Mondrowitz scorned the “self-appointed spokesmen of G-d,” who, he wrote, had made “a great deal of noise” about him. Mr. Mondrowitz boasted to Mr. Leshner about having secured a rabbinic ruling in his favor “from the *Badatz* of *Yerushalayim*.” However, he refused to share that ruling with Mr. Leshner, calling it “a very old story.”

Hearing Little

To Dr. Neustein and others, the crux of the “old story” was how little most Orthodox leaders wanted to hear about the case and how invisible the victims seemed to have become.

“Prominent people in the Orthodox community, men with

political influence, kept telling me: ‘The community doesn’t want this case prosecuted; it will shame the community.’ I didn’t believe everyone really wanted it covered up, but the victims had no way of speaking out, and, for a long time, I could only intuit what they wanted,” says Dr. Neustein.

Mr. Hikind acknowledged that Mr. Mondrowitz might well have “looked normal and respectable.” “But a lot of children and their parents recognized that he was a problem,” said Mr. Hikind.

New York Magazine

The atmosphere began to change in May 2006, when *New York* magazine mentioned the Mondrowitz case in an article dealing with child sex-abuse among Orthodox Jews. One of Mr. Mondrowitz’s alleged victims found himself drawn to the article because of its subject, saw Mr. Mondrowitz’s name, and immediately contacted Mr. Leshner, who was mentioned in the *New York* piece because he was representing an adult who had been a child-victim.

Like they had so many times over the years and for so many different journalists, Dr. Neustein and Mr. Leshner had given the *New York* magazine reporter information on the case, but this time, it was different. The piece caused an uproar.

“After all our shouting from the rooftops, it was like hearing an echo come back, saying, ‘Yes, that’s me. I was a victim, and I want something done,’” says Mr. Leshner.

Going to the DA

Accompanied by his new client (who has requested ano-

nymity), Mr. Leshner went to the DA’s office so the former victim could tell his story and urge the prosecutors not to let the felony charges against Mr. Mondrowitz languish any longer.

As news about the *New York* article spread, more alleged Mondrowitz victims came forward. Mr. Leshner now represents six of them, and, he says, he knows specifically of several more.

He filed written complaints with the DA on behalf of many of these victims, now grown men, but each time, he was told that nothing could be done.

Not Retroactive

In July 2006, Mr. Schmetterer, the DA spokesman, told the *Forward* that even though Israeli law had changed in 1988 to allow the extradition of suspects charged with sodomy, the DA’s office was “hamstrung” in Mr. Mondrowitz’s case because, Mr. Schmetterer said, the law could not be applied “retroactively.”

“Our position is that he cannot be extradited; he could not be extradited then, and he cannot be now,” Mr. Schmetterer told the *Forward* at the time.

But the alleged victims—spurred by Mr. Leshner’s continuing activism and by their awareness of each other’s existence—were becoming increasingly vocal. They gave interviews to reporters; some appeared on television. They sought out people sympathetic to their case on Internet blogs.

Allow a Trial

An increasing number of Jews in the Orthodox community contacted Mr. Hynes’s office to let prosecutors know they wanted Mr. Mondrowitz to be

tried, says Mr. Leshner, who received copies of some of the letters and emails sent to the DA.

“I knew Mondrowitz could be brought back for trial, and I made sure a lot of other people knew he could be, too,” says Mr. Leshner.

His determination was matched by that of Mark Weiss, one of his clients, who appeared on Nightline on October 11, 2006, to talk about the abuse he says he suffered at the hands of Mr. Mondrowitz. A married resident of East Brunswick and the father of three sons, Mr. Weiss, now 40, has no problem expressing his outrage at the stalled case.

“Every time somebody gets let down as a victim, it’s a further continuation of the abuse,” said Mr. Weiss, on the program.

Pay Off

This past October, Mr. Leshner and Dr. Neustein said they believed their activism for justice had paid off: The Brooklyn DA’s office confirmed that it had renewed its request to extradite Mr. Mondrowitz.

Mr. Schmetterer said the request for Mr. Mondrowitz’s return was filed in February 2007, shortly after the State Department and Israel’s Ministry of Justice agreed to broaden the spectrum of crimes under which extradition from Israel will be allowed.

“As soon as the treaty was changed allowing extradition on the charges he faces, we moved to have him extradited,” said Mr. Schmetterer. “We have always said over the years that we never lost sight of the case, but the treaty

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didn't allow for extradition."

According to Mr. Schmetterer, Israel's Ministry of Justice is now "working hard" to fulfill Mr. Hynes's request.

Member of the Shul

When contacted by the *Jerusalem Post* about the case, the Justice Ministry declined to comment, and Mr. Mondrowitz hung up the phone as soon as the reporter identified himself.

However, a prominent member of the Ger community in Jerusalem defended Mr. Mondrowitz to the *Post*. "There are people who are trying to disparage Mondrowitz's name," said the source, who asked for anonymity. "Mondrowitz is a very intelligent, talented man and so are all his children. His father is highly respected in the community. I can't believe these stories are true."

The source said Mr. Mondrowitz was in the computer business, although, for a short time, he seems to have worked for the highly

respected Jerusalem College of Technology as a fundraiser and for the Jerusalem College of Engineering as a lecturer.

Rabbinic Complaints

But Mr. Mondrowitz's supposedly sterling character seems to have been questioned even by the ultra-Orthodox community in Israel. According to the *Jerusalem Post*, in 1988, Israel's Edah Haredit Rabbinic Court issued a ruling mentioning "insidious acts" committed by Mr. Mondrowitz and warning him to stay away from children.

It is unclear if there are any pending charges against Mr. Mondrowitz from the Israeli authorities which would, for Jerusalem, supersede the request from Mr. Hynes's office.

Nevertheless, for Mr. Leshner and Dr. Neustein, the fact that the Brooklyn DA has finally moved to extradite Mr. Mondrowitz is "a complete turnaround."

"Twenty years ago, I was

told that nobody in the community wanted him prosecuted. Now it seems that everybody does," said Dr. Neustein.

She is now editing a book on child sex-abuse in the Orthodox-Jewish community to be published by Brandeis University Press. Her contributors include prominent rabbis and other Orthodox professionals, and several chapters will deal with the Mondrowitz case.

Bittersweet Victory

While Mr. Leshner said he is "elated" at the prospect of seeing Mr. Mondrowitz in a court of law, the victory is bittersweet for many of Mr. Mondrowitz's victims.

"It's a shame it took so long. People committed suicide over him," one of the victims, now 44, told Nancie Katz of the New York *Daily News*. But, he added, "this will send the message."

Mr. Hikind agreed. "There's been a lack of justice for the victims and their

families. It's time that was ended," he said.

Long Haul

Mr. Leshner says he remembers vividly the day he brought his first client to the DA's office in Brooklyn.

"It was a gray, rainy day, and we met outside the building. I knew what we were up against; two people trying to lift a huge stone off something that so many people wanted covered up. I asked him if he was ready, and I told him: 'Once we go through that door, nothing is going to be the same.' He was ready, and in we went," he says.

That was over a year ago, Today, Mr. Leshner says, "I used to wonder if I had promised too much, if my client was going to be let down again after all. I even wondered if all the years of work on the case might have been wasted. But now I know I was right. Everything really is starting to change. And there's no going back. S.L.R.