



# Child Sex Abuse Case Still Haunts

The Cold Case of Avrohom Mondrowitz and the Silencing of a Community

By ROXANNA SHERWOOD

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**Oct. 11, 2006** — - Retired New York Police Department Det. Pat Kehoe still remembers a phone call she got more than 20 years ago, from a person making allegations that a rabbi was sexually abusing children in his neighborhood.

"I never received a call like that in my whole career in the New York City Police Department. Never," Kehoe told Cynthia McFadden in a recent interview.

"I'll never forget it because unfortunately it was my birthday, November 21 1984. I was working in the Brooklyn Sex Crimes squad and I received an anonymous call from a male who started to say that there was a rabbi and gave the name and he was abusing people on this block," she said.

Rabbi Avrohom Mondrowitz, as he called himself, lived on a tree-lined block in the Borough Park section of Brooklyn. Kehoe and her partner, Sal Catafulmo, went out to the neighborhood where Italians and Hasidic Jews lived side-by-side.

At one of the first addresses they tried, she says a resident told her "Everyone knows Rabbi Mondrowitz. He's good to all our children. He buys them bicycles and takes them away on weekends and things."

That might sound like a recommendation, but not to Kehoe.

"With that information I got very scared," she said.

Kehoe's background in an NYPD pedophilia squad taught her to recognize the signs of pedophilia.

"Pedophiles have a pattern with children to get their confidence and send their so-called love, you might say, and buy them things," she said.

What she heard from the children themselves only confirmed her gut feelings.

"We brought them in without their parents," Kehoe said. "They started to tell us, 'The rabbi is our friend. He takes us away,' and things like that. As the questions became more difficult for the children -- 'Did anything ever happen? Did anything sexual ever happen? Are you aware of it happening to anyone else while you were there?' -- they all broke down and cried, each one separately."

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

Apparently the self-proclaimed rabbi -- Mondrowitz had no formal rabbinical credentials -- was counseling young Orthodox boys in the basement office of his home in Borough Park.

Kehoe and her partner immediately obtained a search warrant for his home. When they got to the address, there was no answer at the door, so Kehoe climbed through the basement window.

The alleged pedophile and his family had fled and his house was completely vacant but for what Kehoe says were up to a hundred files of Orthodox boys that Mondrowitz had been counseling in his basement office.

Kehoe and her partner reached out to all of the Orthodox boys' families, she says, but no one would talk.

"They were members of the Hassidic community, and as we found out through the investigation -- at the time I wasn't completely aware of all the different rules in the Hassidic community. And one of the things is that if one of them is ever sexually abused, whether it be by a pedophile or raped, there's a very large stigma that prevents them from getting married and going forward with their lives if this is ever found out or brought to anyone's attention," she said.

The only victims that cooperated with the investigation were Italian. They were neighborhood boys who trusted the rabbi because he bought them gifts like bicycles. Not a single Orthodox Jewish boy or their parents would talk to the police.

The statements of four Italian boys, aged 11 through 16, were the basis for the indictment against Avrohom Mondrowitz. He was facing eight counts of sexual abuse in the first degree, endangering the welfare of a child, and five counts of sodomy in the first degree.

The allegations against Mondrowitz were shocking to those who knew him. Rabbi Herbert Bomzer has been a fixture among ultra-Orthodox rabbis in Brooklyn for more than 50 years. He is president of the Flatbush Rabbinical Board, composed of nearly 100 rabbis. He hired Mondrowitz to counsel boys at a school for Orthodox boys in the late 1970s.

"He was very effective, so much so that toward the end of the school year when they were planning the graduation exercise the student reps requested that I should invite him to be the guest speaker at the exercise," Bomzer said.

Young boys were equally impressed with the charismatic older man. Mark Weiss was one of them. At 13 years old, growing up in Chicago, Weiss says he was having trouble fitting in and reconciling his orthodoxy with the outside world. In the summer of 1980, his father sent Weiss to New York to receive counseling from Mondrowitz.

"He had kind of a sporty little car, and he had this really cool sound system in there. And right off the bat I remember being just completely overwhelmed with just like how cool this guy is," Weiss said. "He took me out to eat. He took me out to lunch, to dinner. He took me to an amusement park. He took me sightseeing here."

Weiss trusted the man so much that with his family away on a trip to the mountains, he didn't hesitate when Mondrowitz invited him to sleep in his own bed with him, telling him, Weiss says, that it might be more comfortable there than in another bedroom in the front of the house.

What Weiss says happened in the rabbi's bedroom is something that even to this day makes him uncomfortable to talk about, but he knows how important it is to tell his story, not only for the sake of raising consciousness but for his own healing.

He says that over the course of the week he spent with Mondrowitz, the older man sodomized him on multiple occasions.

Weiss says he tucked the experience away in the deepest recesses of his mind and did not think of it again, that is, until five years later, in 1984, when as an 18-year-old, he was celebrating the holidays in Chicago where he says Mondrowitz was also visiting family.

"I look across the room, and across the room I see Remel Mondrowitz," Weiss said. "It just hit me like a ton of bricks what had happened and I froze. And I just sort of went into a state of shock."

Everything came back to him, he said.

"I realized that I was sexually molested when I was thirteen years old," he said

Weiss immediately turned to his parents for guidance. He first told his mother.

"She was just completely incredulous. She couldn't accept what I was telling her," Weiss said. "What I was telling her was essentially shaking the entire infrastructure to its foundation, really, because it was more than just me being molested. It was just the unraveling of the entire foundation of her support system and of her religious infrastructure."

His father was also devastated and confused -- after all, this was a man he respected and knew. Weiss said his father told him Mondrowitz was a frum man -- a religious Jew.

His father's belief that this is perhaps an experience better kept quiet is a view, Weiss said, his father still maintains today.

"Just a few short days ago, my father was in a panic that this was just going to turn into a huge Chillul Hashem, which is a disgrace of God's name," Weiss said. "A bad image would be cast upon Judaism and orthodox Judaism and the Jewish people."

Now a 39-year-old husband and father of three sons, Weiss said he has carried his painful memory of abuse silently for years. About five years ago, when he and his family were living in Denver, he saw an announcement in a Jewish publication for an event for survivors of sexual molestation.

He was ecstatic at the prospect that his community was finally prepared to confront this problem, so he immediately booked a flight to New York.

"It was going to be this night in which survivors were to be able to meet with leaders of the Jewish community and they were to be able to address and to tell their stories essentially and to be heard for the first time, really, in a public forum in the right wing religious community," he said. But the event did not unfold as he had imagined or hoped it would.

"It was very clear, unfortunately, that the rabbis who were there and the leaders of our community didn't really have an understanding of what it was they were there to do," he said.

"None of the survivors got to say a word. Any questions that were to be asked were written down on these little index cards and they sort of cherry picked the most benign questions and subsequent comments that were followed up by the rabbis really had nothing to do with actual sexual molestation whatsoever," he said.

When the evening was over, Weiss said he was devastated.

"Anybody who was really a victim and really had gone through some horrible experiences was really shell-shocked. We sort of all walked around like we had just survived a plane crash."

A Fall 2000 ad in the Jewish Image published an announcement for one such event, "Let's talk about what never happened..." and in small letters underneath "...but it did." Another ad that ran in a 2001 Jewish Observer advertising one such event bears in its heading a clear message of silence: "SHHH..."

"Because of the unwillingness to expose it, pedophiles can operate pretty safely in the orthodox community?" McFadden asked Mark Weiss. "It's fertile ground. It's fertile ground," Weiss readily replied.

"I've met victims and survivors who have been told by their rabbis they shouldn't say anything because this is what we call Lashone Harah," explained Rabbi Mark Dratch, a(n) [former] officer of the Rabbinical Council of America and head of JSafe, an organization to help (Orthodox) Jewish victims of domestic violence and sex abuse.

The biblical concept of Lashone Harah is "gossip or slander, a biblical prohibition against maligning another person, against speaking ill of another person," and holds even when the allegations being made are proven true, Dratch said.

There's another biblical concept at play when dealing with sex abuse and domestic violence in the community, he said.

"It's called Mesira. And that's a prohibition on the books of reporting fellow Jews to the authorities under any circumstances," Dratch said.

The mesira edict was published in a Yiddish-language Orthodox Brooklyn newspaper called Der Blatt in the wake of a case of a 6-year-old Orthodox Jewish boy who had brought allegations against a rabbi who had been tutoring him. The case was brought before the Brooklyn district attorney, who ultimately disbanded the grand jury on the case.

Sociologist Amy Neustein, an Orthodox Jewish woman who studies sex abuse in the community and who says she has spoken to members of the victim's family, said the Hebrew publication that ran under the title "Severe Warning and Prohibition" drove the child's family out of town.

"Rabbis sign on to this edict about Mesira stating that he who informs to the Christian authorities can be murdered at the first opportunity," Neustein said. "Well of course that sends such a chill to the family that they pick themselves up with their children, from Brooklyn and they ran out of the county."

"Victims are very hesitant to come forward," Dratch said. "Number one is the denial of the community. So there is a fear that they are not going to be believed.

"Secondly, it's -- I'll use a wonderful Yiddish word -- it's called Shanda, the shame of it all. And individuals are afraid of what the impact of their report will be on themselves personally and on their family and on the extended family," he said.

"The shame is that Mondrowitz didn't get arrested. To me that was the shame," Kehoe said.

Mondrowitz, now 58 years old, has been living comfortably in Israel since 1985, and the retired NYPD detective said she believes he has been amassing new victims.

"Hundreds, I'm sure. He's been in Israel almost 20 years," Kehoe said. "It's a sickness. It's something that you have to do every time when you find a new victim."

In the wake of recent allegations against another Brooklyn Orthodox rabbi, several Orthodox Jewish men alleging that they too were sexually abused by Mondrowitz have come forward to tell of the abuse that they say has haunted them.

Michael Leshner, an attorney who represents six alleged victims of Mondrowitz, including Mark Weiss, said it is similar to what has happened with the Catholic Church.

"The comparisons are obvious, but I would say at the same time that what we are seeing in the Jewish community is in some respects worse because it's more institutionalized," he said.

Rabbi Mark Dratch agrees.

"As an outsider to the Catholic Church, it seems to me that there is an infrastructure or a hierarchy and they have the mechanism, they really do have the mechanism to effect systemic change in a much easier way in a much more efficient way and a much quicker way because of that hierarchy," Dratch said. "In the Orthodox world, we don't have such a hierarchy. There is no pope and there are no levels of responsibility and answerability."

Dratch said there is no way to really gauge how widespread the problem is in the community, "because of this conspiracy of silence."

All parties involved with this story wanted to make sure that one thing was absolutely clear -- that there is sex abuse against children in every community. They would like to see changes in the way some rabbinical leaders handle the allegations when they surface.

"The biggest thing that I worry about really is that I represent the story well and not pre-cast it off in way that this just looks like a besmirch of -- a black eye and a besmirching of the Orthodox Jewish world," Weiss said. "But the truth is, is that it is a black eye to everybody. This problem knows no borders and no boundaries."

"The community senses there is a crisis here and that something very serious needs to be done," Dratch said.

ABC News easily found Mondrowitz living in a quiet Jerusalem neighborhood, his name prominently displayed on a mailbox. He even lectures at the Jerusalem College of Engineering.

He politely declined to be interviewed for the story, and thanked us for the opportunity.

"Mondrowitz proved to be brilliant at working the system," Leshner said. "He understands this Orthodox culture, if possible, better than we do. He understands just what it will do and just what it won't do, what he can get away with and when he has to run. He's manipulated it masterfully and that is really a shameful commentary on the community. That a man like this understands it so well and has been able to turn it so well to his advantage all these years."

"And I was told when I embarked on this crusade to examine, explore sex abuse in the Orthodox Jewish community that Mondrowitz was the key, what he was able to do and how he comported himself and how the community so adroitly managed to cover up for what he did and to keep things quiet as he was out of the country. Just to keep the victims suppressed. To keep their voices silenced," Amy Neustein said.

Though some members of the Orthodox community told ABC News this is a very old case and very old charges with very deep wounds and that it would be better to just let it go now, but Leshner told a different story.

"That's not what my clients believe and they're the victims carrying the wounds," he said. "That's not what I believe and I belong to the community they do."

Leshner, who plans to push the Brooklyn district attorney to try to extradite Mondrowitz.

"This man is not an ancient man. He's only 58 years old now. He was 37 when he fled the country. These victims are not ancient people. These are people in their late 30s and early 40s. They are seething, still seething with what was done to them," Leshner said. "And as one of them put it to me, every day that Mondrowitz can live openly in Israel knowing that he's safe from prosecution because nobody cares, is another day that they are victimized all over again."

The question of whether Mondrowitz could be extradited to stand trial in the United States is unclear. When Mondrowitz fled, then Brooklyn District Attorney Elizabeth Holtzman made swift moves to have the alleged pedophile extradited, but under Israeli law at the time, sodomy against boys was not recognized as an extraditable offense, so she was unsuccessful.

Israeli law has since been changed.

The current Brooklyn District Attorney, Charles Hynes, is not trying to extradite at this time.

Weiss said he believes that speaking about the issue of sex abuse is the only answer.

"Throwing it under the rug will do no good. You need to just come out and say it and you know what, we are better people for it," he said. "Nobody's going to look down upon the Orthodox Jewish community negatively because we're talking about this. They are going

to come to admire us for being straight about it and admitting we have a problem and we're going to solve it.

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