

Two Rabbis Are Charged In Sexual Abuse on a Plane

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The chief rabbi of a Hungarian Hasidic congregation in Borough Park, Brooklyn, and his assistant rabbi were charged in Los Angeles yesterday with sexually abusing a 15-year-old girl on a flight from Melbourne, Australia, where the men had been on a lecture tour. The rabbis denied the allegations.

The suspects, Rabbi Israel Grunwald, 44, the head of Congregation Tuldos Yakov Yosef, and his assistant, Rabbi Yehudah Friedlander, 44, were arrested as they stepped off a plane at Los Angeles International Airport on Wednesday on the basis of a complaint made during the flight by a sobbing girl and radioed ahead, Federal officials said.

Arraigned in Los Angeles yesterday before a United States magistrate, Carolyn Turchin, Rabbi Grunwald was released on \$10,000 bail for a June 21 preliminary hearing on a Federal charge of sexually touching a minor, an offense with maximum penalties of two years in prison and a \$250,000 fine.

Rabbi Friedlander, who was charged with more extensive sexual abuse, was held for further investigation after the court was told he had admitted some of the acts to Federal agents, though contending that the girl had encouraged him, and that Rabbi Friedlander had pleaded guilty to a charge of third-degree sexual abuse in Monticello, N.Y., in 1991. If convicted, he faces up to 15 years and a \$250,000 fine.

Neither suspect entered a formal plea during the hearings, which were attended by dozens of rabbis from Los Angeles and New York in support of their colleagues. But outside the court, Mitchell Egers, a lawyer representing both men, said his clients vehemently denied the charges.

"These are fine, decent, moral men, highly respected and looked up to by thousands of people in their community," Mr. Egers said. He said neither rabbi knew the girl, who is American, and he called the case "a mixup" and said he was "confident that the truth will emerge and that we'll all be happy."

Rabbi Bernard Freilich, administrator of the Council of Jewish Organizations of Borough Park, which represents 250 Jewish congregations, said Rabbi Grunwald was the son of Josef Grunwald, the late Grand Rabbi of the Pupa Hasidim, who transplanted Holocaust survivors from Pupa, Hungary, to Brooklyn after World War II.

Today, the sect has more than 12,000 members in Monsey, N.Y., Montreal, London and Jerusalem, as well as in Williamsburg and Borough Park in Brooklyn. Yakov Grunwald, the founder's eldest son, is the Grand Rabbi and head of the Williamsburg community, and Israel Grunwald leads several hundred families in Borough Park.

The acts were said to have occurred on United Air Lines Flight 842 over the Pacific. Federal prosecutors, who assumed jurisdiction under laws governing United States aircraft in flight, said the girl, whose name was withheld because of her age -- she turned 15 during the flight -- had accused Rabbi Grunwald, after first engaging her in conversation, of reaching across an empty seat, placing his hand under her shirt and touching her breast.

The girl's detailed complaint said Rabbi Friedlander, who had been sitting on the far side

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of his colleague, exchanged seats with Rabbi Grunwald, and made a series of unwanted approaches while the cabin lights were dimmed for movies and rest periods during the long overnight flight.

She said he forced his hand under her clothing and touched her breast repeatedly and her vagina, despite her pleas for him to stop and her efforts to push his hand away. The girl said she finally began sobbing and retreated to the lavatory.

An affidavit by Mark Van Steenburg, the Federal Bureau of Investigation's senior agent at the Los Angeles Airport, said that another passenger, Sheila Myers, seated across an aisle just forward of the girl, told him she saw Rabbi Friedlander grope the girl for five to eight minutes under a blanket and alerted the flight crew.

Mr. Van Steenburg said Rabbi Friedlander told him the girl had put his hand on her breast twice, and on her pelvic area. "I did it, I shouldn't have done it, but it happened," the agent quoted the rabbi as saying.

The allegations stunned the rabbis' colleagues, neighbors and members of their community in Borough Park, many of whom called the actions unthinkable and the charges unbelievable, possibly trumped up by the teen-aged girl. They also complained that the rabbis, who were dressed in their traditional black garb and wore beards and sidecurls, had been humiliated by Federal agents who handcuffed them as they stepped off the plane.

"It's the most shocking thing I could ever think of," said a neighbor of Rabbi Grunwald, who lives with his family above his synagogue at 1137 53d Street.

Rabbi Freilich spoke of "tremendous anger in the Jewish community" over the charges, and said: "It is impossible that an Orthodox Hasidic person would even speak to a female, much less touch her. Our information is that she was trying to get into a conversation with them. To us, it looks like she drummed up a charge."

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