

Deal to Drop Sex Charge Against Rabbi Unravels

Courts: Defense assails U.S. prosecutors, who say they were responding to inaccurate statements.

[September 13, 1997](#) | DOUGLAS P. SHUIT | TIMES STAFF WRITER

A deal that would have led to the dropping of a sexual misconduct charge against a New York rabbi who was accused of fondling a 15-year-old girl during an international airline flight turned into a tangle of claims and counterclaims Friday.

In blistering public statements, attorneys for Rabbi Israel Grunwald attacked U.S. Atty. Nora M. Manella of Los Angeles for "false, unethical and outrageous" statements that they said broke the spirit of an agreement to drop a misdemeanor charge against the religious leader.

While rebutting Manella, they released details of what they said was an FBI sting involving a \$50,000 payoff by members of the Jewish community to the victim and her father. Both sides accuse the other of initiating the idea for a payoff.

Under the proposed settlement with the rabbi, Grunwald reportedly agreed to perform 500 hours of community service unrelated to his congregation and undergo psychological counseling.

Manella, in outlining the deal Thursday, set off the lawyers for Grunwald by saying that "the United States believes the rabbi committed the crime." Manella added that Grunwald had "signed a statement acknowledging that the government possesses sufficient evidence from which a jury could find him guilty of that crime."

The comments, said West Los Angeles attorney Edward M. Medvene, violated the spirit of the deal and distorted Grunwald's position that "he specifically denied responsibility."

"Why the government saw fit to escalate this matter I don't know," Medvene said.

Nathan Lewin, one of Grunwald's attorneys, said in a statement from his Washington office that Grunwald had "refused to sign any statement that admitted the allegation."

Calling the conduct of the U.S. attorney's office a "shameful" effort to "smear Rabbi Grunwald's reputation," Lewin said Manella's office should take the unusual step of withdrawing from the case and turning it over to an independent federal prosecutor.

"It's not going to happen," said Thom Mrozek, a spokesman for Manella. "We have no intention of withdrawing from this case because we didn't do anything that was unethical."

Mrozek said the U.S. attorney's statement was issued because "we thought we had to make some response to what we thought were inaccurate statements" by the defense attorneys.

Grunwald's attorneys, meanwhile, pressed their contention that the victim and her father were involved in "an extortion attempt" that consisted of demands of cash in return for the young woman's agreement not to testify.

According to the defense attorneys, payoffs of \$800,000 and \$1.3 million were discussed.

Medvene said he was present in Burbank on Aug. 24 when government agents met with the young woman and her father and an initial payment of \$50,000 was made.

The \$50,000 was to be a down payment on a much larger amount, the defense attorneys said. The money was handed over to the young woman on a parking lot outside a Starbucks by Rabbi Ephraim Stein of Brooklyn, a friend of Grunwald's, Medvene said.

Government agents seized the money once the exchange was made, but no charges were filed. One of the FBI agents wore

a yarmulke to enhance the deception, Medvene said.

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The FBI and U.S. attorney's office refused to discuss the alleged sting.

A criminal investigation is continuing into the actions of the young woman and her father, a source close to the case said.

Grunwald was accused of molesting the then-15-year-old girl during a flight from Melbourne, Australia, to Los Angeles in 1995. The girl contended in interviews with authorities that she persistently tried to fend off the advances of the rabbi, a leader of a branch of a New York-based Hasidic sect.

Yehuda Friedlander, an assistant of Grunwald's who was on the same flight, pleaded guilty to abusive sexual contact with a minor and received a 22-month prison sentence.

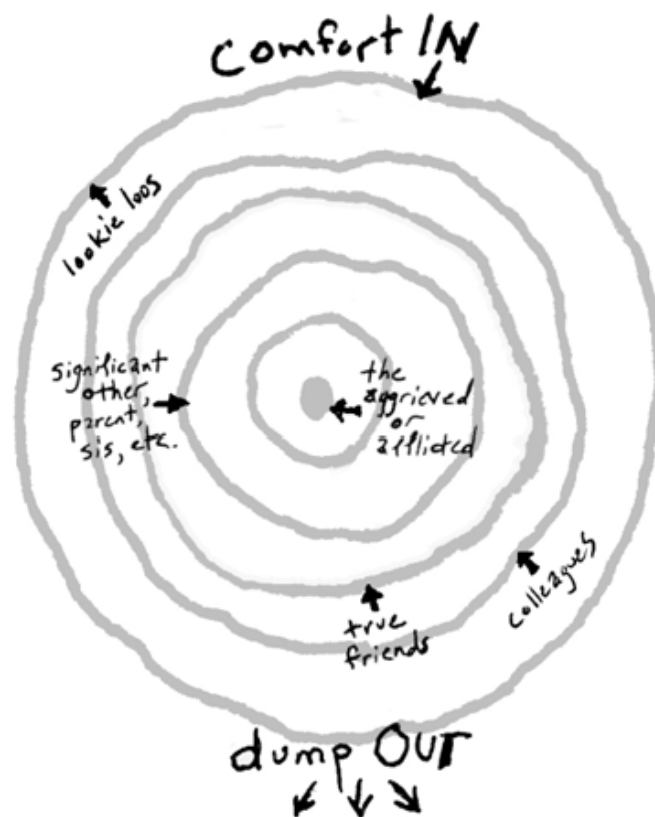
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