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Cantor fined for child porn

Arrest shock synagogue; Teacher flies back to U.S.

by Eva Hoare and Amy Pugsley Fraser

A Hebrew school teacher and cantor at a Halifax synagogue, who downloaded hundreds of pornographic photographs of children from the Internet, was fined \$2,200 in court Tuesday.

The fine was paid and Stuart David Friedman, a well-liked and respected member of the Beth Israel Synagogue, promptly left the country for his native United States.

It's the first charge of its kind in Nova Scotia and justice officials hinted that Mr. Friedman's activities - downloading a personal fantasy collection of boys performing sexual and sadomasochistic acts - could be connected to an international child pornography ring.

Mr. Friedman, 42, of South Park Street, Halifax, pleaded guilty to possessing child pornography from the Internet. When Canada Customs and police officers arrested him during a raid on his apartment Monday, the cantor was surfing the Net.

Although his private cache contained photographs and videos - as well as gay and bondage magazines - the bulk of his collection was 223 computer-generated photos of child pornography stored on diskettes, on two computer hard drives, and on computer printouts.

"It's extremely disgusting", said Const. Gary Martin of the Halifax Regional Police Service, whose officers also conducted a search of Chebucto Freenet offices, Mr. Friedman's Internet provider. "Ninety per cent of this material was obtained either directly or indirectly through the Internet. Some ... was directly downloaded from the Internet and some ... was obtained from different groups that are within the Internet", Const. Martin said.

"The pictures are very explicit. It covers just about every avenue of pornography that's out there."

Canada Customs' intelligence division started working the case last September and then brought in regional police, said Ed Osborne, customs' regional intelligence officer.

Now officers - who'll spend hundreds of hours poring over the materials - want to know if any Nova Scotian children were depicted in the "gruesome" photos and material seized. But they do not expect that will be the case.

Parents of children who attended the Hebrew school, shocked by the arrest, planned to meet Tuesday night.

"As aware as people are that these things can and do happen, it's still a shock", said Cathy Fox, president of the Beth Israel Synagogue. Her three children - two sons and a daughter - were taught by Mr. Friedman at the synagogue's Hebrew school. "It's a very difficult time."

The cantor - who leads the congregation in song - taught her 13- year-old son songs and chants that were part of his bar mitzvah ceremony last October, Mrs. Fox said.

Some members will feel betrayed as a result of the charges. "I think the elderly members of our congregation will be very hurt by this." Some are appalled while others expressed sympathy.

"I'm very saddened", said Robert Wolman, president of the synagogue's board of governors.

Mr. Wolman said he and other board members heard about the case Monday night and Mr. Friedman was immediately dismissed.

Wearing an olive-colored trenchcoat and a black yarmulke (skull cap) over his greying hair, a pale and visibly nervous Mr. Friedman was ushered into provincial court by two sheriff's deputies. Refusing even to look up at the judge, he stared resolutely at the floor while wringing his hands.

"This is the first (such) charge through our office", Crown attorney Frank Hoskins told Judge Hughes Randall.

"But it sends a message out to the public that if you're in possession of these images from your Internet and they're child pornography, you can be charged with a criminal offence and get a criminal record and a substantial fine", Mr. Hoskins said later.

Canada Customs received information about a child pornography ring in Canada and the United States operating via the Internet, surface mail, and electronic (e-mail), the Crown attorney said.

Officers said Mr. Friedman's apartment was "ill-kept and unclean", and that they also found letters with explicit sexual content. A second search conducted at Chebucto Freenet yielded his e-mail records.

Mr. Hoskins and defence lawyer Joel Pink said Mr. Friedman, who co-operated with police, was only using the material for his own sexual fantasies.

"His intent was possession, not distribution or selling", said the Crown.

The former cantor - who is not married - has provided information that will help police bring more "like-minded individuals" to justice, Mr. Hoskins said.

Outside court, police Sgt. Bill Cowper, the department's Internet specialist, said this is just the beginning.

"We're pursuing every angle at this time. He's not the only person. ... The investigation does involve law enforcement officials in Canada and in the United States."

Police said Mr. Friedman is being investigated over the alleged distribution of photos to other Internet users.

Police won't say which American agencies are involved and the U.S. Customs Service, reached late Tuesday, declined comment.

Mr. Hoskins asked that Mr. Friedman surrender his computers, valued at \$1,200 and \$1,500 apiece, to the court in addition to the \$2,200 fine (\$2,000 plus a \$200 victim surcharge). Two sets of handcuffs were also confiscated.

After the court appearance, Mr. Friedman took the 4:45 p.m. flight to Boston to be with his family.

Officials won't comment on the amount of the fine - the offence carries a maximum of five years in prison - saying that's up to the judge. But they did say there was a plea bargain.

Mr. Friedman, holder of a music degree from an American university, arrived in Halifax in August 1994 and has worked at Beth Israel ever since.

His last posting as a cantor was in the Detroit area.

The man, whose job was to lead prayers, teach Hebrew school, and help prepare boys for bar mitzvah, has no prior criminal record, Mr. Pink said.

"My eldest son has a great deal of respect for the cantor", said Mrs. Fox, who wanted to break the news to her children before they heard it through the media.

"We have to do this in a very nonalarmist fashion ... I'm still thinking about how we will handle this."

Mr. Wolman said the board of governors would review of the matter as soon as possible and plans to tighten the screening process for future cantors.

Police also said they found a stash of adult pornography - 31 nude or partially-nude self-portraits - but the charges stem from the child-related material.

(With staff reporters Bruce Erskine and Barry Dorey)

Photo: Cantor Stuart Friedman is escorted into Halifax provincial court by a police officer and a sheriff's deputy on Tuesday.

Photo: Stuart Friedman at the Beth Israel Synagogue in Halifax in 1995.

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