

Inquiry Begun Into Claim Of Child Abuse at Center

By FRANK J. PRIAL
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The Brooklyn District Attorney is investigating claims that dozens of children were sexually molested at a now-closed unlicensed day-care center in Brooklyn last year, according to participants in the case.




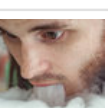
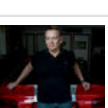
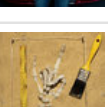

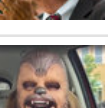
A spokesman for District Attorney Charles J. Hynes refused to confirm or deny that an investigation was under way, but Assemblyman Dov Hikind, a Brooklyn Democrat, said he and more than 70 parents of children who had attended the school met with Mr. Hynes on Feb. 6 to discuss what they contended was slow progress in the investigation.

The operator of the school was Mordechai (Morton) Ehrman, participants in the case said. He ran the school, known as the Simcha Play Group, at his home at 1444 East Fifth Street in the Midwood section. Working with him were his wife, Tova, several of his 10 children and an undetermined number of hired teachers, participants in the case said.

Mr. Ehrman's lawyer, his cousin, David Stern, said that four complaints by parents about the Ehrmans had been investigated by the Special Services for Children Division of the Human Resources Department. He said the files had been closed earlier this year for lack of evidence.

'No One Gives a Damn'

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He said that the Ehrmans had been intimidated, threatened and harassed since the allegations first surfaced last year, and that they had received no help from the city. "No one gives a damn," he said.

The controversy, which was reported yesterday in New York Newsday and The Daily News, has prompted several angry encounters between the Ehrmans and parents, participants in the case said. Several weeks ago, Mr. Ehrman went to court to answer charges of harassment brought by one father, Sam Antar. The case was postponed.

No charges have been filed against Mr. Ehrman or anyone in his family, but Mr. Hikind said he understood that evidence was being heard in the case.

Reached by telephone in Israel, where he is vacationing, Mr. Hikind said parents first began coming to him last fall. "Some of them didn't even want to tell me their names," he said.

Dozens of Children Questioned

Mr. Hikind said dozens of children had been questioned by assistant district attorneys since the investigation began.

All the families involved are Orthodox Jews, Mr. Hikind said, and some had been cautioned by their rabbis not to make their complaints public because they might embarrass the Jewish community. The Ehrmans are Orthodox Jews, too, and advertised their day-care center as a school for Orthodox Jewish children.

Mr. Hikind said the controversy began when a mother went to her rabbi complaining that her 3-year-old daughter had been molested at the school. Mr. Hikind said some rabbis in the neighborhood encouraged parents to press charges against the Ehrmans. "Some rabbis even urged them from the pulpit," he said.

Mr. Stern said Mr. Ehrman first heard the accusations when he was summoned before a Beth Din, a traditional rabbinical tribunal. "They demanded that he sign away his right to



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deal with children for the rest of his life," Mr. Stern said.

Accusations of Rape and Fondling

Mr. Ehrman refused and called Mr. Stern, a former assistant district attorney in Brooklyn, who said he called the District Attorney's office and demanded an investigation. "I sent the District Attorney the names of all the children in the school and all the children in the summer program," he said.

Mr. Ehrman later demanded another rabbinical court so he could present his side of the controversy. "They met three weeks ago, but not since," Mr. Stern said.

According to Mr. Hikind, the charges against the Ehrmans include sexual abuses ranging from fondling to rape. "There are some things I can't bring myself to discuss, even on the telephone," the Assemblyman said.

Mr. Stern said anonymous phone calls about the controversy had cost Mr. Ehrman and one of his daughters the jobs they had taken after they closed the school.

Photo: A former day-care center at 1444 East Fifth Street in the Midwood section of Brooklyn is under investigation by the Brooklyn District Attorney concerning charges that children were sexually molested there last year, according to participants in the case. (The New York Times/Vic DeLucia)

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