

Burn Job

Israeli leader Olmert asked a federal judge to give a break to Brooklyn arsonist

by Tom Robbins

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Last Wednesday, a throng of supporters from Williamsburg's Orthodox community traveled to the federal courthouse in Central Islip, on Long Island, to show support for a powerful Brooklyn businessman named Nat Schlesinger, who was facing criminal sentencing, having been convicted last year on charges of arson, mail fraud, and—a particularly tough count under federal law—using fire to commit a felony.

In addition to showing up in the courtroom, Schlesinger's supporters sent dozens of letters to U.S. District Judge Arthur Spatt urging lenience and describing Schlesinger as a generous and community-minded man. One of the letters was from Israel's current prime minister, Ehud Olmert, who wrote the judge that he had known Schlesinger for years.

Olmert's letter was written on official stationery from Jerusalem on September 11 of last year, when he was still vice prime minister of industry, trade, and labor. (He became acting prime minister in January when Ariel Sharon suffered a debilitating stroke; he was elected to the top post in March.) Olmert described his friend as "a man devoted to goodness and benevolence toward his fellow man and his community." He added that Schlesinger was a Holocaust survivor who had helped many minority families by giving them employment in his factory. "Thoughtfulness and respect of others were synonymous with his lifestyle. . . . Nat is the type of man who is always ready and willing to help," Olmert wrote.

Other than Olmert's plea for "mercy, compassion, and understanding," there was no reference to what had brought Schlesinger before the judge. But the circumstances were troubling. Schlesinger, who has long been a major figure in Williamsburg and upstate Monsey, where he owns property, was found guilty of having set a fire that took place on December 31, 1998. The New Year's Eve blaze occurred at a huge, block-long industrial building the businessman owned at Wallabout Street and Kent Avenue in Williamsburg, where he manufactured women's clothing for such high-end stores as Neiman Marcus, Saks Fifth Avenue, and Bloomingdale's. The inferno almost felled a firefighter who became lost in thick smoke on the building's third floor, where the fire had been set in a maze of boxes. The firefighter had to send a "Mayday" message before he was rescued, unharmed.

According to testimony at the trial, Schlesinger was overheard the day after the incident agreeing with someone who called the blaze "a job well-done." The businessman was heard to say in response that "we will have to wait for the claim that is going to go through." It did. Schlesinger's insurance company later paid him \$4.5 million, which was in addition to another \$4.5 million he had received for claims he filed in four earlier fires at the same property. Many of the claims, testimony at the trial later showed, were the result of inflated repair invoices; one estimate came from an engineering firm that turned out to be fictitious.

It was only after a dogged fire marshal named Bernard "Buddy"



Israeli interim Prime Minister Ehud Olmert waves as he arrives for a conference of the Jewish fund-raising organization Israel Bonds in Jerusalem, April 30, 2006.

Photo: AP/Wide World

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Santangelo started looking into the unusually unlucky fire history at 50 Wallabout Street that the pattern was detected. The investigation was a long one, and the indictment wasn't brought until October 2003, when Roslynn Mauskopf, then newly installed U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of New York, blasted Schlesinger for having "jeopardized the safety of New York City firefighters."

As a result of the jury verdict against him, Schlesinger, 69, faced the possibility of some 22 years in prison, based on federal guidelines. It wasn't his first time before a federal judge. Back in 1978, Schlesinger was sentenced to 18 months in prison for conspiring to bribe a polygraph examiner to submit a fake report on behalf of a diamond smuggler.

A few minutes later, Judge Spatt sentenced Schlesinger to 15 years in prison. His attorney, Herald Price Fahringer, said he would appeal.

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