

Brazil's Top Jewish Leader Goes to Jail in Florida for Shoplifting

Contributed by Elma Lia Nascimento
Friday, 30 March 2007

New York raised Rabbi Henry Sobel, 63, one of Brazil's most respected religious leaders and for more than 35 years president of the São Paulo Israelite Congregation (CIP, Congregação Israelita Paulista), Latin America's largest Jewish congregation, has been arrested in Palm Beach, Florida, accused of stealing 4 ties from different upscale stores.

Together with former São Paulo cardinal Evaristo Arns, rabbi Sobel, has been an important force in favor of social justice in Brazil. He was a constant presence at ecumenical celebrations against torture by the Brazilian military dictatorship, in the 1960s and 1970s.

According to the Palm Beach police, which made the arrest last Friday, March 23, the rabbi spent the night in jail and only was released after paying US\$ 3,680, US\$ 680 for the ties and US\$ 3000 as bail. Sobel was taken to the police station at 6:15 pm, on Friday, and only released the next day at 3:30 pm.

After being detained thanks to a camera that captured him stealing the tie, Sobel, at first, denied the theft. He once again denied he was the man shown in pictures of the police precinct's Internet site when the news appeared in the Brazilian media. .

The Florida police report states that the authorities were told Friday afternoon by a saleswoman at a Louis Vuitton store that they suspected an older man had stolen a tie.

After noticing the disappearance of the object the store reviewed the store's surveillance camera tape and found out a client who took a tie, folded it and then left the shop without stopping at the cashier. Later, a policeman recognized the rabbi as the man on the tape.

Questioned by the officer he ended up confessing that he had stolen the tie, after having offered to pay for it. When the police searched inside his car they found, always according to the police report, three other ties, which were also stolen. Sobel told he had paid for them, but could not produce any proof of payment, like a receipt or a store packaging.

Two of the ties valued at US\$ 180 and US\$ 170 were from Louis Vuitton and Giorgio's. The other two were a Gucci and a Giorgio Armani and cost US\$ 155 and US\$ 175 respectively. The police called all the stores and found out none of the ties had been paid for.

Before presenting his temporary resignation to his congregation, which was promptly accepted, Sobel released a note to the press in which he says he had no intention of stealing the ties:

"I never intended to steal any object in my entire life. I'm personally used to face crises and charges and I can defend myself. I cannot allow, however, that people attempt to disqualify the moral values that I always stood up for."

Sobel apparently hid the incident even from his wife, the artist Amanda Sobel, who was born in New York and lived in Palm Beach. When asked about the case by a reporter of O Estado de São Paulo she answered:

"I don't believe it. It can only be a lie. He really was there in Florida but he didn't tell me a thing about arrest or ties. It can only be a frame-up. We will prove that this news is entirely false."