

PROFILE

Manny Waks

BY DOREEN WACHMANN

Manny had to flee Melbourne over backlash to his sex abuse claims



AUSTRALIAN Jewish community leader Manny Waks has paid a heavy price for going public about the sexual abuse he suffered as a boy at Melbourne's Chabad Yeshivah Centre.

The revelations in 2011 in Melbourne's leading newspaper, *The Age*, split not only Manny's large family, but also the city's Chabad and Jewish communities.

The Pandora's Box that Manny opened when he told his story to the general media caused such a backlash that Manny and his parents had to flee Australia.

Yet, despite all this, Manny, who now leads Kol V'Oz — an international organisation to counter sexual abuse within worldwide Jewish communities — reckons his efforts have been worthwhile.

The eldest of 17 siblings in a Chabad family, Manny was born in Israel, but moved with his family to Melbourne when he was seven. He attended the Yeshivah Centre school near his home.

Manny, born Menachem Leib Waks, claims that he was sexually assaulted at the age of 11 by Velvel Serebryanski, the son of a prominent Chabad shaliach, in the women's section of the synagogue on Tikun Leil Shavuot.

Manny recently tracked down Velvel in New York where, in an Israeli TV recording, Serebryanski admitted the abuse, saying that

He molested me in front seat of his car

he had loved and been completely infatuated by Manny and thought he had enjoyed it too.

Victoria police have just reopened a case against Velvel after other victims stepped forward.

Manny's second abuser at the Chabad school was David Cyprys, a karate teacher now serving an eight-year jail sentence for five charges of rape, five charges of indecent assault, attempted indecent assault and two counts of gross indecency.

Manny said: "He was my karate teacher. It started with on-top-of clothes molestation. It progressed to more forceful touching.

"He used to put me in the front seat of his car and molest me. I froze. He would put me in the back of the class when we were doing exercises and would come behind me and grab my genitals. The most serious attack took place inside the male mikva."

The only person Manny confided in at the time was a classmate.

Manny said: "He betrayed me and shared it with other classmates, who called me gay. It was an additional source of ridicule.

"I didn't open my mouth to anyone else after that. That caused me to be very quiet, not to share with anyone else.

"The adults around us were hearing all that was going on. They watched the bullying and did nothing. I had to keep my dirty little secrets for many years."

The trauma of the abuse and ridicule from his classmates made a serious impact on Manny's behaviour both at home and at school.

He said: "I rebelled against religion before my barmitzvah. I

showed a complete disinterest in religious rituals. I started not keeping Shabbat and kosher.

"My parents just thought I was a rebellious teenager. My parents took me out of general school and put me in a full-time Jewish studies programme from early in the morning till late at night.

"I didn't do very well. Most of the time I was being kicked out of institutions because I was rebelling. I wasn't showing much interest in my studies.

"I was not keeping strict adherence to Jewish law.

"At one point my parents kicked me out of the house because I wasn't walking around with religious attire. I was a bad influence on my siblings.

"There were a whole lot of kids under me who would be influenced. Because I did not wear a kippa, it was easier to throw me out of the house. I didn't finish school."

Eventually Manny joined the Israeli army.

Manny, who has opened an academic research institute on the effect of sexual abuse on Jews, now says: "I am aware of numerous cases where male victims of child sexual abuse in the Diaspora end up going into the IDF.

"It is worth exploring from a research perspective the challenges around sexuality and manhood which cause this to happen."

During his army service, Manny returned to Australia on a month's leave for a sister's wedding.

While there, he heard on the radio that there was a police campaign, Operation Paradox, for any information relating to child sexual abuse. That was when he told his father what he had suffered nearly a decade previously.

Manny recalled: "My father was

in shock. He supported me straight away. I asked him to call the police for me."

Manny's mother was less happy about the truth being revealed.

Manny's father, Zephaniah, ultimately paid a heavy price for supporting his son.

Some 15 years later Zephaniah was excommunicated from Chabad, which he has now left. He was forced to flee Australia to Israel with his wife.

Their large family is severely divided over the issue.

But, meanwhile, the police were not able to pursue Manny's allegations for lack of evidence.

Manny tried to get his life back on track, married and returned to Melbourne to catch up on his studies, graduate from university and

I started to not keep Shabbat and kosher

take leading roles in Australian Jewry.

But the ghosts from the past still remained, particularly when Manny discovered on visiting his parents' home on a Shabbat that one of his abusers, Cyprys, was on security duty outside the Yeshivah Centre.

Manny said: "The sight of my abuser standing watch in front of the Yeshivah Centre compounded my trauma and would have compounded the trauma of many other victims as well, at being confronted by him still being in that position over a decade after the abuse.

"He was put in that position of trust and authority, responsibility and entrusted with the welfare of the community including children. He had access to the rooms, to the offices.

"It was incredible considering the fact that the Yeshivah Centre had been aware of some of the alle-

gations from as early as 1984 and again in the mid and late-1980s."

Manny spoke to Rabbi Yitzchok Dovid Groner, the Yeshivah Centre director.

He said that he was aware of the allegations and that serial sex offender Cyprys was being treated. But he could not assure him that he would not re-offend.

So Manny tried to get on with his life. While working as a special needs assistant, he caught up on his studies and entered university where he became heavily involved in Jewish student politics, particularly in countering antisemitism and defending Israel.

His first position on leaving university was as Bnai Brith Anti-Defamation Commission executive officer.

He then moved to Canberra, where he was assistant director of the Government's Office of Transport Security.

In a voluntary capacity, he served as president of the Canberra Jewish Community and vice-president of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry.

Then he said: "Suddenly it occurred to me that I had gone to the police, I had gone to the community leadership and I hadn't been able to progress the abuse case.

"Through all my professional and voluntary work experience I got the idea of reaching out to the media to raise awareness around the issue because I knew that I wasn't the only victim in the Jewish community.

"The fact that I was vice-president of the Jewish community meant that I needed to show leadership on this issue. If I wasn't going to show it no-one else would. No-one else had until that point.

"I felt that it had been imposed on me to make the matter public because it just needed to be exposed."

The story on the front page of *The Age* in July, 2011, he said, "really opened up a Pandora's Box. There was a lot of shock, discussion and positive feedback. There

were many other disclosures of allegations of child sexual abuse, which came to me, to the police and to other community leaders.

"But it soon became clear that it was not going to be a brief battle, but a very long war. The last six years, there has been a war with many casualties."

The first casualties, he said, were the victims and survivors of abuse and their family members.

But he said: "More broadly the Jewish community's reputation has suffered. Our leadership, rabbinic and lay, have been brought into disrepute by the actions and inactions of our community leaders."

Nevertheless, he maintained: "The last few years there have seen significant progress in every segment of society, including in the Jewish community and its ultra-Orthodox community. It is heart-

Systemic issues in the organisation

ening to see this transition, but many of us have paid a heavy price."

After the public scandal of what happened at the Yeshivah Centre, the Australian government set up a Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

Manny said: "Allegations had been coming out of the Catholic Church for many years. The government had been reluctant to respond in a broader way.

"When the allegations came out in the Jewish community, it showed that there was a systemic issue within organisations. When the Jewish community scandal broke it really emboldened the government to take a much deeper look into this issue."

The five-year-long Royal Commission is due to wind up at the end of this year. Last year it examined the allegations about the Yeshivah Centre.

The Commission forced an entire change of management at the centre. One rabbi was forced to resign and several perpetrators have been found guilty and imprisoned.

Follow Manny on Twitter @mannywaks and read his blog at www.mannywaks.com



SERIAL OFFENDER: David Cyprys

BORN: Kfar Saba, 1976.

POSITIONS: Bnai Brith Anti-Defamation Commission executive officer, Australian Government's Office of Transport Security assistant director, Capital Jewish Forum founder and president, Online Hate Prevention Institute founding director, Canberra Jewish Community president, Executive Council of Australian Jewry vice president, New South Wales Jewish Communal Appeal governor, Tzedek chief executive, Kol V'Oz chief executive.

FAMILY: Parents Zephaniah and Chaya Waks, 16 siblings, wife and three children.

HOME: Ramat HaSharon.