

The Schmooze Stories with a Yiddish Twist

SHELDON SILVER, THE “GONIF”*

*The Urban Dictionary defines the Yiddish word “gonif” as a thief, a crook, an untrustworthy person, particularly one who steals outright or overcharges for merchandise. They’re a bamboozler or trickster.

by
Marjorie Gottlieb Wolfe



Syosset, New York

The headlines read:

**FORMER NEW YORK ASSEMBLY SPEAKER SHELDON SILVER
GUILTY ON ALL ACCOUNTS**

Silver, 71, an Orthodox Jew whose parents were Russian immigrants, is a “gonif.” His father ran a hardware store; his mother was a housewife. He lived all of his life on Manhattan’s Lower East Side. He and his wife, Rosa, once a city schoolteacher, have four children.

Over the years, Silver was called many names: The Sphinx. An Enigma. A Master of Political Chess in Albany. Or, for some, the man who outlasts governors.

Shown below is a timeline of important events in his life:

1944 Year of birth

1965 Graduated from Yeshiva University with a BA degree

- 1968 Received his J. D. from Brooklyn Law School
- 1968-71 Practiced law with the firm of Schechter and Schwartz
- 1971-76 Law Secretary for Civil Court Judge Francis N. Pecora
- 1974 Lost NYC Council race
- 1976 First elected to the Assembly. He represented the 65th Assembly District, comprising much of Lower Manhattan, Wall Street and the former World Trade Center site. According to Sophia Hollander and Josh Barnabel (WSJ), "Some colleagues dismissed Mr. Silver when he arrived at the Assembly as a soft-spoken 32-year-old lawyer in 1976. He listened quietly during debates, steered away from news conferences and public speeches, and refrained from shouting during the loud arguments that sometimes erupted in tense negotiations. As an Orthodox Jew, he observed the Sabbath from sundown on Friday through Saturday evening."
- 1991 Silver was instrumental in the repeal of the New York City's commuter tax.
- 1994 Became the Speaker of the N.Y.S. Assembly. He was re-elected 11 times.
- 1997 Silver was a key advocate of state-administered rent regulation of New York apartments.
- 2006 A former top aide to Silver, Chief Counsel J. Michael Boxley, was accused of raping two legislative aides while working for the speaker. Boxley pleaded guilty, and Silver was sued for failing to investigate the accusations properly and for tolerating a culture of sexual harassment in the Assembly. Silver and the Assembly leadership agreed to pay \$500,000 to settle the lawsuit.
- 2007 The New York Post charged that Silver's refusal to disclose the details of his employment or the income he received, leads to suspicions of a conflict of interest. (This income ultimately led to his arrest and resignation as speaker.)
- 2012 Silver's total income and financial holdings weighed in at between

\$3.8 million and \$6 million according to his annual financial disclosure statement. That money included the salary of \$380,000 to \$450,000 while working for the law firm of Weitz & Luxenberg. Source: Daily News, July 3.

- 2012 [Re: State will track addictive prescriptions in real time] Silver said, "Prescription drug abuse has become a pervasive problem in communities across this state. This legislation will help to control prescription drug abuse by creating a real-time online database enabling doctors and pharmacists to track certain controlled substances. This initiative will ensure patients receive the medication they need and deter those who abuse them."
- 2014 Silver announced that he intends to introduce legislation to accelerate raises in New York's minimum wage--which just went up on New Year's Day--to \$9 an hour, a year ahead of schedule.
- 2015 (Jan. 7) Silver was elected Speaker for the 11th time despite a federal probe into his outside income.

Two women, Victoria Burhans and Chloe Rivera worked for former B'klyn Assemblyman, Vito Lopez. The women were sexually harassed by Lopez. They received a total of \$580,000, the bulk of which will come from the State. The rest will be paid by Lopez himself. Lopez resigned in 2013, which caused problems for Sheldon Silver, who helped cover up previous harassment claims against Lopez.

Source: Zack Fink, Time Warner News, Feb. 5, 2015

A son-in-law of Silver, Marcello Trebitsch, 37, and a Rabbi, pleaded guilty to a \$6 million Ponzi scheme. He promised investors to Allese Capital a 16% return, and then doctored financial statements to reflect profits, while in reality he was using the fund for his own personal benefit and to pay back other investors.

(Jan. 22) Silver was arrested on federal corruption charges. It seems that Silver received payment for years from a law firm that specializes in seeking reductions of N.Y.C. real-estate taxes. Similar charges involved millions of dollars in asbestos lawsuit-related referral fees that Silver received from the law firm of Weitz & Luxenberg. Note: Silver had no experience in real estate or asbestos litigation, two of the areas where he received referral fees

from law firms.

Assemblyman, Michael P. Kearns, a Democrat from the Buffalo area who does not caucus with his Party, said the speaker should step down. Asked who might replace Silver, Mr. Kearns was blunt:

“Anyone,” he said, “who is not under indictment.”

Source: Michael M. Grynbaum and Jesse McKinley (www.NYTimes.com.)

(Jan. 30) Silver submitted his resignation as Speaker, effective Feb. 2, while retaining his position as Assembly Member. He vowed to fight the charges against him.

(Feb. 19) A grand jury indicts Silver on charges of fraud and extortion in connection with his official duties.

(April 23-25) A revised indictment adds a money-laundering charge. Silver was indicted on new charges of making illegal investments through private vehicles, netting a profit of \$750,000. He pled not guilty.

(Nov. 2) Trial jury selection begins. The jury ranges in age from 28 to 69. Two-thirds of the jurors have college or graduate degrees. Seven are from the Bronx; three are from Manhattan.

(Nov. 3) Opening statements. Testimony is given by Assemb. Amy Paulin (D-Westchester), who described Silver’s extensive power over legislators and bills.

(Nov. 4) Dr. Robert Taub testifies that he referred asbestos-disease patients to Silver’s law firm to curry favor in hopes of getting research funding.

Andrew Goldstein, Asst. US Attorney, said that the trial featured over 20 witnesses and hundreds of pages of evidence. “This boiled down to a simple question of motive. “Why did Sheldon Silver do it? He did it for the money,” Goldstein said. “His services were corrupted by his greed and lies, by bribery, kickbacks and extortion.”

(Nov. 24) Jury begins deliberations. The jury consisted of 4 men and 8 women. They reached a verdict after roughly 2 1/2 days.

Headline (New York Post, Nov. 24, article by Kyle Smith):

**SILVER IS THE POLITICAL EQUIVALENT OF
A SQUEEGEE MAN**

Kyle Smith wrote, “Silver comes across as the political equivalent of the Squeegee Man who dumps filth all over your windshield, and then demands to be paid for it.” Mayor Giuliani signed a law in 1996 that specifically targeted squeegee pests by outlawing aggressive pan-handling.

(Nov. 30) Silver was found guilty on ALL COUNTS: bribery, extortion and money laundering. The charges carry a maximum of 130 years behind bars. He remains released on bail.

Silver’s successor is Assembly Speaker, Carl Heastie.

Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo issued a statement praising the verdict: “Today, justice was served. Corruption was discovered, investigated, and prosecuted, and the jury has spoken...There will be no tolerance for the violation of the public trust in New York.”

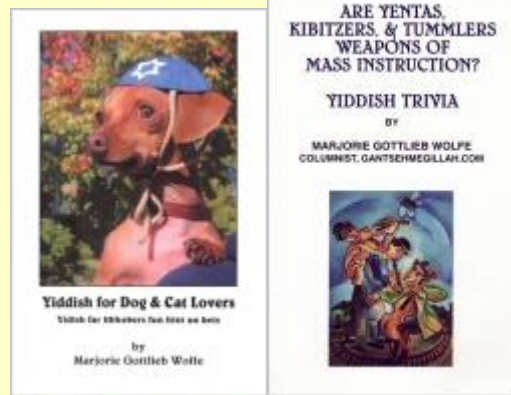
The leader of the Assembly’s Republican minority, Brian Kolb, called the conviction “a clear signal - again - to Albany: Enough is enough.”

In Yiddish, we would say, “Genug iz genug.” Sidney J. Jacobs (“The Jewish Word Book”) says, “ge-nug shoin!”--enough already; all right already!

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**Marjorie Gottlieb Wolfe is the author of
two books:**



**"Yiddish for Dog & Cat Lovers" and
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