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ISRAEL

By REBECCA ANNA STOIL | 07/10/2006 09:18

Zaka: Police used autopsy on drowned boy as revenge



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Angry Zaka negotiators accused Lachish Subdistrict Police on Monday of taking advantage of the drowning death of eight-year-old Shimon Zwicker in order to take revenge on the religious community for last month's theft by haredim of a body awaiting postmortem examination. "It was sweet revenge against the religious community for the stealing of the body from Ashdod," said Zaka legal adviser Moshe Gutwine, who labored Monday to prevent invasive operations from being carried out on Zwicker's body. "The police were trying to create a provocation." The tragic story began Sunday, when Zwicker and approximately 40 other children from the Itamar Talmud Torah's summer camp visited Nitzanim Park. After the children finished their outing and were being loaded on the bus to return home, counselors noticed that Zwicker was missing. The counselors conducted a quick search, but when they realized that the boy was nowhere to be found they requested professional assistance. Search efforts began immediately, and searchers soon discovered the boy's shoes lying by the side of the park's lake. A team of 20 Zaka divers began to search the lake's murky waters after dark on Sunday evening and continued to comb the lake's floor for almost six hours, but to no avail. Only after sunrise, helicopter search teams flying low over the lake displaced enough water to reveal the boy's body, sunk in the thick mud at the bottom of the meter-and-a-half-deep lake. Four counselors from the camp and two kayak operators who



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lake. Four counselors from the camp and two kayak operators who worked at the lake were all detained by police for questioning shortly after the incident. In addition, both the school's principal and Zwicker's teacher were questioned and released on restricted terms. But the story did not end with the body's discovery. As in any case of death by unnatural causes, police said, the boy's body was required to undergo a postmortem examination. The boy's parents opposed the examination on religious grounds, but the family and police came to agreement on a non-invasive examination at Abu Kabir's L. Greenberg Institute of Forensic Medicine after Zaka advisors intervened. According to Gutwine, the police received the initial report from the external examination, which ruled out any suspicion of criminal activity, and then "went to the district's attorney to fight over whether or not to release the body." Lachish Subdistrict Spokeswoman Ch.-Insp. Michal Hayim said that they had done no such thing, and that it was the district attorney's office that had demanded that the body undergo further testing. She emphasized that, while the circumstances of Zwicker's death necessitated a full postmortem examination, police had sought compromise with the family in order to accommodate their religious beliefs. Gutwine said that the court session to determine the fate of the body was held at the police's request and carried out without notifying the Zwicker family, drawing contrasts to a recent collision on the Trans-Israel Highway in which the deceased's family was present at hearings to discuss the fate of the victim's body. He added that the court appearance was an unnecessary delay, saying that had the police requested blood and fluid samples as part of the external examination carried out in the morning neither the family nor their religious advisors would have opposed the tests. Later in the afternoon, after Zaka legal advisors called on MK Moshe Gafni (United Torah Judaism) to assist their case, the Ashkelon Magistrate's Court decided that the boy's body should be released to his family for burial late Monday afternoon at Ra'anana's old cemetery. Gutwine said that he believed the police piled unnecessary levels of bureaucracy on the case in revenge for the May incident in which haredi extremists stole the body of a 13-month-old baby in order to prevent a postmortem examination from being carried out on her body. "The entire case today was police irresponsibility," Gutwine said. "We at Zaka are faithful to the principle of respect for the dead, but not less than for the living. This incident was terrible enough, and it is inappropriate to make the family sadder over such

police provocations." He added that he had requested that Gafni review the Lachish Subdistrict's behavior before the Knesset's Interior Committee. Hayim vehemently rejected Gutwine's claims. "They always see something related to revenge, but we are required to rule out a situation that someone injured or killed the boy," she said in defense of the postmortem examination.

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