



Obituaries

Mel Weinberg, con artist at center of Abscam sting, dies at 93

by [Harrison Smith](#) June 7 [✉Email the author](#)

At the center of an FBI corruption investigation that employed fake Middle Eastern sheikhs, a 65-foot yacht, plush hotel suites and paper bags of cash was a convicted con artist, a cigar-chomping swindler who once sold socks without soles and jackets without backs.

“You gotta think fast,” Mel Weinberg once said, explaining the improvisatory approach that helped him cheat ordinary people on the streets of the Bronx and then ensnare a dozen government officials on bribery and conspiracy charges. “You can’t hesitate at all. Talk fast and bluff like hell.”

Mr. Weinberg, who was 93 when he died May 30 at a hospital in Palm Beach Gardens, Fla., was widely regarded as the linchpin of the Abscam sting, the late 1970s and early 1980s investigation that resulted in the convictions of politicians including one U.S. senator and six members of the House of Representatives.

Described by Justice Department officials as part of a new FBI focus on white-collar crime, the two-year undercover effort exploded into public view in February 1980. The operation featured more than 100 agents led by FBI agent [John Good](#), as well as the efforts of outsiders such as Mr. Weinberg, who cut a deal with the FBI to avoid prison time for an advance-fee scam he was running out of Long Island.

“Mel was a fabulous con man,” Good [told the Star-Ledger](#) in 2013. “He was a very, very intelligent guy. A little on the crude side, but with a magnificent ability to con people. ... Without him, it’s unlikely we ever would have had a case.”

While the FBI hailed Abscam as its largest political corruption investigation in at least a quarter of a century, critics said the bureau had overreached and accused investigators of entrapment. The case spawned stricter guidelines for FBI undercover operations, as well as a 2013 movie loosely based on Abscam, “American Hustle,” which starred a potbellied Christian Bale as Irving Rosenfeld, a stand-in for Mr. Weinberg.

The con man was enlisted by the FBI in 1978, soon after he was arrested for his advance-fee racket. Presenting himself as a slick, limo-riding representative to a nonexistent foreign bank, he had offered to help customers with bad credit get a loan. He took fees of several thousand dollars and eventually told his marks that their loan had been turned down. The fee, he would remind them, with a tinge of regret, was nonrefundable.

Mr. Weinberg was arrested after one of his targets grew suspicious and called the FBI, which reportedly offered to clear his three-year prison sentence in exchange for work as an informant. He went on to receive a stipend of \$3,000 a month, he said, and assisted in an investigation of stolen paintings that soon ballooned into Abscam.

The case name was short for “Arab scam,” law enforcement authorities said after the investigation became public; later, amid accusations of racism and xenophobia, officials said the name was in fact a contraction of “Abdul scam,” a reference to the Abdul Enterprises Ltd., a business created as a front for the operation.

In essence, the investigation was a fishing expedition, in which Mr. Weinberg posed as the representative of a wealthy, unscrupulous sheikh aiming to do business in the United States. With FBI agents posing as officials in the company, and eventually as sheikhs, the group swept up mid-level racketeers until receiving an introduction to Angelo Errichetti, the well-connected mayor of Camden, N.J.

He was recorded offering Mr. Weinberg and his front company entree to Atlantic City, where gambling had recently been legalized. “Without me,” he told them at a meeting, “you do nothing.”

Through Errichetti, Mr. Weinberg and the FBI began meeting with congressmen at hotels, on a boat near Fort Lauderdale, Fla., and at a house in the Georgetown neighborhood of Washington. Each location was bugged with video cameras or listening devices, which recorded interactions such as [Rep. Richard Kelly](#) (R-Fla.) stuffing his pockets with \$25,000 worth of bribes and asking, “Does it show?”

When Rep. John J. Jenrette Jr. (D-S.C.) was asked whether he would be able to ensure the passage of an immigration bill that would aid one of the sheikhs, [he replied](#), "I've got larceny in my blood."

In addition to Errichetti, Kelly and Jenrette, the investigation resulted in convictions of Reps. [John M. Murphy](#) (D-N.Y.), [Raymond F. Lederer](#) (D-Pa.), Michael J. "Ozzie" Myers (D-Pa.) and [Frank Thompson Jr.](#) (D-N.J.), as well as Sen. [Harrison A. "Pete" Williams Jr.](#) (D-N.J.). Three Philadelphia councilmen were also among those convicted. All resigned or were kicked out of office.

Despite the investigation's success in the courtroom, Mr. Weinberg said he believed its work was incomplete, hampered in part by diminished resources. "I think we coulda got at least a third of the whole Congress," he told journalist Robert W. Greene in "The Sting Man," a 1981 history of the case.

"I'm a swindler," the book quoted him as saying. "There's only one difference between me and the congressmen I met on this case. The public pays them a salary for stealing."

Melvin Weinberg was born in the Bronx on Dec. 4, 1924. His mother was a Swiss-born homemaker, and his father ran a store that sold plate glass.

After Mr. Weinberg returned from Navy service during World War II, he worked in his father's shop, according to "The Sting Man," throwing rocks through neighborhood windows to increase sales.

It was one of the earliest of his many hustles, which culminated with the advance-fee scam. Mr. Weinberg was by then on his second marriage, to Cynthia Marie Regan, and spending much of his time with Evelyn Knight, whom he described in "The Sting Man" as "the salad dressing, the schmaltz" of his cons. When he was arrested in 1977, he told [Britain's Telegraph newspaper](#), he cut a deal with the FBI to hand her over, part of an effort to reduce his prison sentence. It was followed by a second deal, to join up with the bureau.

Mr. Weinberg recalled that the Abscam investigation, though ultimately effective, was bumbling and nearly went off the rails. The sheikh outfit was purchased from a costume shop for \$37, and kosher corned beef and coleslaw were once accidentally served at a dinner.

"It was a farce," Mr. Weinberg told the Telegraph. "Here was an Arab eating kosher food in a headdress made for a kid. The thing came down to his shoulders where it should have come down to his knees. It was stupidity."

The tape recorder, fixed to the underside of the coffee table, fell down during the meal, but Mr. Weinberg said he "managed to kick it under the table."

Amid legal controversy over the FBI's methods in the case, Mr. Weinberg's wife told news outlets and the Justice Department that her husband accepted a payoff from one of the case's defendants. (Mr. Weinberg denied the claim.) She died in 1982 from an apparent suicide.

Mr. Weinberg later married Knight, who confirmed his death and said the cause was not immediately known. Their marriage ended in divorce, as did Mr. Weinberg's first marriage, to Mary O'Connor.

Survivors include a daughter from his first marriage; a son from his second marriage; and several grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Two children from his first marriage died before him.

In the years after Abscam, Mr. Weinberg ran a chain of dry-cleaning shops, according to a [Hollywood Reporter obituary](#) by his friend David Howard, and worked as director of security for the fashion house Louis Vuitton. In the mid-1980s, he helped Louis Vuitton and Gucci track down the manufacturers and distributors of counterfeit handbags in a case dubbed Bagscam.

He said he was paid \$250,000 for the rights to his story in "American Hustle."

"Getting caught was the best thing that ever happened to me," Mr. Weinberg told Howard shortly before his death. "All the con men in those days died young."

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 **8 Comments**

Harrison Smith is a reporter on The Washington Post's obituaries desk. Since joining the obituaries section in 2015, he has profiled big-game hunters, fallen dictators and Olympic champions. He sometimes covers the living as well, and previously co-founded the South Side Weekly, a community newspaper in Chicago.

 Follow @harrisondsmith