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**N.Y. / REGION**

# Landlord Accused of Harassing Tenants Is Arrested

By MIREYA NAVARRO and KIM BARKER JULY 26, 2016

During the single-digit temperatures in winter 2015, the family, with five children, had no heat and no hot water.

That, the authorities say, was not even the worst of conditions the tenants endured as the last rent-stabilized holdouts in a building undergoing renovations so the landlord could attract higher-paying tenants in East Harlem.

The water in the family's toilet bowl froze, so they had to use bathrooms at nearby restaurants.

Demolition work commenced around them, rendering the building structurally unstable and blocking the only fire exit.

And on many occasions, an agent of the landlord would bang on the tenants' door late at night threatening to report to the authorities their status as undocumented immigrants from Mexico.

The neglect, the hazards and the threats were outlined on Tuesday by prosecutors, who said the family was subjected to “a campaign of intimidation and harassment.”

At a news conference with city officials, Cyrus R. Vance Jr., the Manhattan district attorney, detailed an indictment charging the building owner, his manager and a contractor with reckless endangerment, endangering the welfare of a child and other offenses.

The owner, Ephraim Vashovsky, 48, whose companies own more than two dozen residential buildings in the city; Adam Cohen, 32; and Shaoul Ohana, 56, face up to seven years in prison on the most serious of the 20 charges.

The city also announced a lawsuit against the men and their companies seeking the forfeiture of \$3.3 million in assets.

“That five children had to endure these conditions is perhaps the most disturbing element of this case,” Mr. Vance said.

The three men were arrested on Tuesday morning; they pleaded not guilty at their arraignment.

John Carman, a lawyer for Mr. Vashovsky, said his client was “not the first landlord to be wrongfully accused by a nonpaying tenant with an obvious and substantial reason to make false claims.”

Robert Wolf, a lawyer for Mr. Ohana, said in a statement that his client had been cooperative with the city’s Investigation Department and is not guilty.

Aaron Twersky, a lawyer for Mr. Cohen, said the city’s “narrative is not entirely accurate.”

While prosecuting landlords for harassing tenants is rare, city and state authorities have been turning to the courts more frequently to crack down on the landlords suspected of wrongdoing. The most prominent example: Steven Croman, whose companies controlled more than 140 Manhattan apartment buildings, was charged in May with 20 felonies.

Mr. Vashovsky’s companies own at least 26 buildings, mostly in Brooklyn, records show.

In June 2015, a two-story townhouse on Tompkins Avenue in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn partially collapsed after one of Mr. Vashovsky’s companies, Vasco Ventures, bought it, two neighboring townhouses and a vacant lot, intending to build an apartment complex. The Buildings Department attributed the collapse to the failure to brace a wall during tear-down work.

When another of Mr. Vashovsky's companies bought the building at 14 East 125th Street in East Harlem for \$1.85 million in February 2013, residents started complaining of rats and lack of heat, and within months, five of the six rent-regulated residents moved out.

But officials said the tactics at 21 East 115th Street in East Harlem were particularly egregious.

After Mr. Vashovsky bought the five-story, 10-unit building for \$3 million in May 2014, workers soon began tearing the building apart from the inside out. Even as the outside walls remained, the building inside was gutted almost to its bones — the defendants are accused in court papers of “removing all internal walls and floors of all other apartments in the building, creating a risk of falling from a height of five stories and leaving said fall risk exposed behind unlocked doors.”

Celestino Cano, Guidelia Nicolas and their five children — the youngest an infant and the eldest 12 years old — had lived in Apartment 5E for 14 years. The family was deeply involved in their neighborhood church and the children were thriving in school, so the tenants remained in the walk-up even as other tenants took buyouts of \$10,000 to \$30,000 from the landlord and left, officials said.

But paying \$2,400 a month for their four-bedroom apartment on the fifth floor did not protect them from the landlord's attempts to force them out, officials said, including bringing an eviction case in Housing Court against them for overcrowding (at one point two more relatives lived in the unit for a total of nine people.)

After a building inspection in March 2015 led to orders to stop construction and vacate the building, the family was temporarily relocated by the Red Cross, officials said. Mr. Vashovsky's company and Mr. Ohana's company were fined \$9,300 for building violations.

Throughout the construction, the landlord collected and deposited the rent checks, which included rent assistance from the city. Mr. Vashovsky cashed the last check two months after the family vacated their home, officials said.

***Correction: August 2, 2016***

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[http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/27/nyregion/new-york-landlord-accused-of-harassing-tenants-is-arrested.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/27/nyregion/new-york-landlord-accused-of-harassing-tenants-is-arrested.html?_r=1)