

British police find Christ Circle cult; reunite mother, sons

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SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — A woman who was reunited with her two sons after a two-year search through Europe says they were following a former Santa Cruz cult leader who promised to one day deliver them from Earth in a spaceship.

Sondra Elkins appeared Monday with Jonas, 12, and T.J., 6, at the San Francisco Airport after an 11-hour flight from England, where police last weekend charged into a hotel to retrieve the children and deliver them to her.

Mrs. Elkins said her sons had spent the last two years roaming Europe with a band of about 20 children and adults, who had run schools in California and Nevada called the Christ Circle and were led by Arthur Hempel.

Hempel taught his followers that he was God and came from a planet called Orionia and that he and a man he called

"Moshe" were the only ones sent to Earth from the planet. She said Hempel told his flock that one day a spaceship would pick up him and his friends. Everyone not part of Hempel's group is derogatorily called "humans," Mrs. Elkins said.

Still waiting to find his three children is Edward Marshall of Felton, who had been in contact with Elkins a month ago after finding out she, too, was trying to locate her sons.

He said he became worried after reading Elkins' report on the cult's activities in Austria, including the flying of the Nazi flag and the teaching of homosexual superiority.

British police have reported that Marshall's wife, Sarah, is with his three children, Kathryn, 18, Phillip 16, and Dhyana, 13. They said Sarah Marshall is a co-leader.

Mrs. Elkins said Hempel also taught that the female

spirit was evil and that males did not need females. "Women were like slaves," Mrs. Elkins said. Mrs. Elkins, a single mother who lives in Los Angeles, was first approached by Hempel in 1978, when she was taking beautician courses at his Western School of Beauty in Temple City. She mentioned that she was having a difficult time financially raising two sons and trying to go to school.

She said he offered to give Jonas and T.J. a scholarship to his Christ Circle School in Boulder Creek and she accepted.

The cult, Christ Circle, was a 160-acre ranch established in 1974 near Boulder Creek. It operated as a child placement center until it was shut down by the state after allegations of child abuse and alleged violations of its license to care for no more than six children, according to a prosecutor in the case.

Mrs. Elkins said she was unaware of the state action. Deputy Attorney General Ralph Johnson said when the ranch opened, it housed 10 to 20 adults in communal living and cared for emotionally disturbed children placed by Contra Costa, Santa Clara and some other counties.

The state began investigating the ranch after it was discovered that 25 to 30 children were being cared for at one time, he said. The ensuing investigation revealed allegations of child abuse.

"One of the most flagrant" was that of physical punishment, Johnson said. Children were required to work on the ranch during the day for food, were subject to systematic

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humiliation and were denied prescribed medicine, he said.

The worst example was a young boy with epilepsy who was refused anti-convulsion medicine and suffered a grand mal seizure, Johnson said.

"I sustained every one of those allegations," said Johnson. "As a result, their license to operate was revoked."

The group left the Boulder Creek area, apparently for Mendocino, then to Reno and elsewhere, and authorities eventually lost track of the members. Representatives of the group could not be located for comment.

"A number of children," who were not under state jurisdiction remained with the group when it left, Johnson said.

When Hempel said he was moving was moving the school from the U.S. to Austria, about a year after she had enrolled her sons, Mrs. Elkins said she had "no reason not to trust" Hempel and agreed to send her children to his school.

But at the end of 1980, when she arrived in Hochfeld, an Austrian village about 20 miles from Salzburg, she said she didn't like what she saw and wanted to take her boys home.

Mrs. Elkins at first said she would "rather not talk about it in front of the children" but later, when the boys were out of range of hearing, she described what she saw.

Jonas was beaten with a shovel when he forgot to button

his coat, she said. Another time, when he took what one of the group considered too big a bite of food, he was taken to the cellar and beaten, said the mother.

She said she left alone and went to authorities for help. She said they agreed to help her get her children but informed Hempel when they would be coming "and of course by then they were all gone."

She then returned to the United States and continued her search from here. She said Interpol, an international police agency, helped her locate the group for a second time.

On Saturday, police from Plymouth, England, raided a hotel in Falmouth, arresting Hempel and reuniting the children with their mother, according to Plymouth detective David Hodson. He said the search began March 15 for Hempel and his American followers at the request of the U.S. Embassy in London.

Hempel was released because "we found Hempel had committed no criminal offenses in this country," Hodson said.

The children with the group now, Mrs. Elkins said, are related to adults traveling with Hempel. Asked her immediate plans, Mrs. Elkins said she planned to take Jonas and T. J. back to Los Angeles "and start checking into schools to try to find out what grade they're in."

Marshall says he believes his children "will remain with the cult unless they are convicted of doing something illegal," since his wife has legal custody.