# The death of Roni Levi

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## A coroner ruled that two policemen who shot a Frenchman on Sydney's Bondi Beach had a legal case to answer. Luke Slattery traces the last days of Roni Levi.

Bondi Beach is at its most beautiful in mid-winter. The crowds retreat to the cafes. The sand is cold underfoot. And on the wings of gentle westerlies come big, unsullied, desert skies. It was dawn at Bondi on June 28 last year, on just such a day, that a young Frenchman strode into the surf as if he were dressed for a nightclub: in a white cotton top, jeans, a Daniel Hechter jacket beneath a charcoal grey Mambo raincoat.

Strange.

Stranger still, he was brandishing a blackhandled kitchen knife.

Roni Levi, dazed and unshaven, was pressing the long and slightly curved blade hard into his stomach. He was spinning it on a finger. He was blabbering and gah-gahing and flicking his tongue. He was in the throes of what doctors would later describe as a "psychotic attack", but no one understood it then.

Within minutes, six policemen joined him at the beach, and their grasp of the situation can be reduced to a sort of telegraphic code: Man with knife. Possibly mad. Dangerous.

Over the police radio a terse conversation was crackling into the ether. "A male gone berserk with a knife," is how he was described by the first unit in pursuit, Bondi One. The time was 6:58.

In family photographs Levi, who was Jewish, his parents Egyptian born, has a mild and intelligent gaze, dark curls framing his bespectacled brown eyes. But that morning his eyes burned with a look described by witnesses as "fierce", "frightened", "pained" and "confused". Perhaps his stuck-in-arunaway-train expression registered not only psychic, but raw physical pain. With the water temperature that morning at 17 degrees, the dawn air a miserly eight, he must have been freezing.

"Come on Roni," implored one of the policemen encircling him at the water's edge.

"Drop the knife and let's go up the beach and have a talk."

"No one is going to hurt you," continued senior constable John Jones, who was acting as a negotiator in place of an expert team.

At 7:19, according to police radio transcripts, negotiators were being discussed with officers at the scene. But it wasn't until 7:25 that the team leader's pager sounded at his inner-west Marrickville home. By 7:33, as he was preparing to leave, still 15 to 20 minutes from Bondi, Roni Levi lay on the cold sand, his vital organs shattered by four medium calibre bullets.

The transcripts also reveal that an ambulance was discussed (in case Levi hurt himself) and water police were dispatched - the absurdly named Launch Intrepid - before negotiators were even considered. Bondi One agrees to police radio control's request for negotiators because Levi "doesn't seem to want to listen to anyone else". But some minutes before, Levi had dropped his glasses in the sand. He could hardly see the six uniformed figures -who must have appeared like a company of blue ghosts - around him.

Earlier, three police had followed Levi into the surf. When he emerged they fell back with three others.

"Drop the knife," they asked repeatedly. "Roni, drop the knife." And then, according to a key witness, as the minutes ticked away and the sun crept over the northern head to light up the white cuticle of Australia's most famous beach, their demands turned scabrous: "Listen you f...ing deadshit. Drop the knife." Roni Levi wasn't listening. His *danse macabre* continued up and down the shallows.

He kept walking, executing clumsy slicing, jabbing, figure-of-eight gestures with the knife, while his coat and raincoat, which had fallen over his arms, trailed behind, restricting his reach. Police from Paddington had joined two units from Bondi. Guns drawn, they squired Levi north and south along the beach.

Suddenly this crazy turned and began heading up the beach into soft sand, towards the concrete promenade raised three metres high. The police now gathered into a tighter semi-circle, backing as Levi advanced for up to 60 metres.

They were calling all the while for him to drop the knife, drop the knife, drop the goddam knife. A jogger with a Walkman, head bowed, was woken from her reverie by a rather unorthodox police command: "F... off." Soon after, as Levi progressed up the beach, knife in hand, witness Barbara Makgill heard these words: "Drop the knife or we'll shoot to kill."

At 7:31 four shots tore the chill morning air.

By this time the semi-circular police cordon was between two and five metres from Levi; about 30 metres from the promenade wall.

Witnesses would later reflect on the anti-climactic oddness of the Frenchman's fall - not thrust backwards with the force of the bullets, Hollywood action style, but straight down. As if his legs had been lopped off at the knees, Roni Levi crumpled silently into the sand, twisting as he fell.

The police rushed in. One used his baton to dislodge the kitchen knife -the 25cm blade which had failed to draw Levi's own blood when pressed into his stomach just minutes before.

Another stood on his wrist. The knife was kicked from his hand, landing a metre away. Turning him over they surveyed the damage. "Ambos, ambos," came a cry.

Levi, with gunshot wounds to his chest and abdomen, was breathing but only just.

By the time he arrived at St Vincent's Hospital in Darlinghurst even his shallow panting had ceased. He had no heart rate, no blood pressure, no signs of brain activity. Four medical teams attempted to save the life of the svelte Jewish boy, aged 34, who had gone somehow awry.

At 8:19 he was pronounced dead.

During the autopsy three police bullets were found lodged in his tall, attenuated frame - the fourth was found in his clothes at the hospital.

Two policemen Senior Constable Tony Dilorenzo and Constable Rodney Podesta had fired two shots apiece from their Smith and Wesson six-chamber revolvers. The last entered Levi's buttocks as he fell to the ground: a final and unnecessary humiliation - as if any of it were necessary.

The autopsy report tells its own spare story. "I believe," wrote pathologist Allan Cala, "that probably the chest and finger wounds (one bullet struck finger then torso) were inflicted first, the order of which is unknown, and that the deceased may have lost balance, crouched over and fell to the ground and, in the process of this received a gunshot wound to the perineum. The entry site of which is located between the anus and the scrotum."

Roni Levi is buried in a cemetery in the Parisian suburb of Villiers-LeBel, near relatives Abraham and Allegra Cohen. He was born on January 6 1964 in Ishkelon, Israel, to Richard and Rebecca Levi.

The Levis were proud Alexandrians until they joined, under the presidency of Arab nationalist Gamal Nasser, yet another a Jewish exodus. From Israel they journeyed to Paris - first stop the suburb where Roni is now buried. He is survived also by a younger brother, Ilane. In family photographs, the two are forever locked in an easy embrace.

Why did Roni Levi die? Could his death have been avoided? Who, if anyone, is to blame? For the past four weeks a coronial inquiry headed by NSW Coroner Derrick Hand, who took charge of the investigation that morning at Bondi, has grappled with these questions. The coroner has sifted through a mountain of evidence, straining to attain some omniscience over and above the often conflicting eyewitness accounts.
Yesterday he found that a prima facie case existed to refer the case to the Director of Public Prosecutions, who will decide if a criminal case might be made against the police officers whose pistol shots killed Roni Levi.

That incident itself is preserved in the clear aspic of photographic film. Outside the coronial inquest, the man who captured it on his tiny Olympus X-A - a professional photographer, as was Roni; a Frenchman, as was Roni - said he felt drawn "into the wheel". The photographer, Jean

Pierre Bratanoff-Firgoff, hid the film in his socks when he realised just what he'd witnessed. He went home and plunged immediately into his darkroom. He sold his scoop to Sydney's Sunday Telegraph, where the photos ran severely cropped and enlarged the next day.

Eight months later they were tendered as evidence to the coronial inquiry, where they would become important investigative tools. The cornerstone was a photograph known in court as Exhibit Seven.
Witness after witness was referred to this image of Levi, apparently walking forward, knife in hand, his two coats - dress jacket and raincoat - entangled in his arms. The two policemen who would soon fire two shots each - Dilorenzo and Podesta -are directly ahead of him.

They stand close together, legs bent, dug in, hands outstretched, guns trained on Levi. Another policeman in a similar posture stands to one side of them. Another has a short baton drawn and appears to have just taken a swing at Levi, without success.

Bratanoff-Firgoff asserts that this photograph represents the split second before the first shot was fired; that he heard the shutter's small whirr, then the first of four gunshots. And around this claim so much in the case turned. For it is the contention of the police that Levi "lunged" at them with his knife in the moments before he was shot; that they consequently feared for their lives, and for the lives of passersby and observers.
Exhibit six, a photo taken perhaps a second before exhibit seven, is the most potent of all. It shows Levi with arms splayed in a crucifixion gesture -the demon at the water's edge now playing the part of victim. It's as if, in his confusion, he'd somehow summoned up an image of Christ, or of the doomed rebels in Goya's famous Execution painting of 1814.

I visited Bratanoff-Firgoff at his Bondi Junction home shortly after his evidence to court. He is a wiry and rather sallow middle-aged Frenchman who still sounds, after fourteen years in Australia, as if he is speaking under water.

When he places his photo prints on the kitchen table they are instantly revealing. Enfolding tragedy aside, the frames are suffused with a shimmering morning beauty.

They show the near-empty beach that the published versions, cropped and enlarged to intensify the drama, tend to conceal. "With a 35 millimetre lens you can see a pretty wide view of the beach," he explains.

"There's never anybody behind him. They could have shot the sand without hurting anybody.

"But that is one situation where they could have opened their eyes and their minds. Probably the most clever situation would have been to just leave him alone. An hour later he would have been cold, sitting on the beach, calling for help."

Of course several other possibilities spring to mind:

Capsicum spray. To be introduced this year.

Dogs. None were called.

Batons. Only one was used, despite the fact that Levi could only lunge, if he lunged at all, at one policemen at a time.

Long poles.

Sand in the eyes.

A net.

An oar.

In the early 1980s I shared a house with Levi's estranged wife, Melinda Dundas. We drifted apart. She travelled to Europe. It was only through friends that I heard about her at all - Melinda is working in London, Melinda has been spotted at a nightclub in Paris, friends spent a weekend with her in Venice. It sounded like a children's storybook: Melinda's Big Adventure. And then, suddenly: Melinda has married a handsome Frenchman called Roni. So it WAS a fairytale.

Like most people who saw Bratanoff-Firgoff's photographs, I was a delayed witness to Roni Levi's death. The news reports were sketchy, and the story seemed confused. Not the pictures - they were disturbingly eloquent, haunting testimony.

Driving home a few nights later I heard a voice over the radio, a once familiar, slightly airy, country girl voice bending under the weight of great pain and I knew, instantly, that this was Melinda and that was her Roni. The next day it was her picture in the papers. She was in tears.

The first sign that something was out of kilter came for Melinda Dundas in 1992, when she and Roni were in Paris.

Even so, it didn't register at the time as a symptom, because there seemed to be no larger illness.

"Roni had gone off to a selfawareness conference, a weekend workshop where you talked about who you are, where you're going," she told me.

"And when I saw him he was starving because there'd been nothing there for him to eat." Not only was Roni vegetarian, he didn't drink or smoke, and preferred hot water to tea or coffee.

She continued: "I can remember he was really hyper when we went out to a Kurdish restaurant, a sort of local haunt. I can remember him saying, `It's fantastic Melinda, I've learnt so much. See that waiter, I know what he's thinking'." At the time she thought it was a delirium brought on by hunger. She took him by the hand, back to the apartment, and he settled down. "I never really thought about it until the day Roni died and Bob McDougall (the officer in charge of the investigation) was on the phone asking me questions."

Although Melinda and Roni separated in stages between late 1994 and early 1995, she has always maintained her love for him: "We were apart, but he was like family." She stayed in Melbourne and got on with things; he moved to Sydney and got on with things. Days before his death he called her. "I need to talk to you," he begged on the answering machine.

Melinda returned the call, and called repeatedly, but there was no answer. In a bizarre sequence her sister would take the call that would inform her of Roni's death. Melinda, hovering in the background, thought it was Roni on the phone finally returning her call, until she noticed her sister shudder and take a deep breath.

In mid-November 1996 Roni moved into a shared house in Annandale, an inner suburb of Sydney, but it wasn't long before arguments broke out over what his flatmates saw as a failure to pay his way.

Early in the new year, Roni asked a doctor at the Double Bay Clinic for an appointment with a counsellor.

“People don’t understand me,” he told his psychiatrist. He confessed to feelings of low self-

confidence. And he used the “D” word: “depression”.

By mid-February he'd left the house in Annandale, and all was well with the world. In May he was described by a friend as "buoyant" and "very happy"; he had a new job doing casual catering work as well as photography.

In mid-June, however, he was again bought low. Caught the previous year trying to scalp T-shirts at the Australian Grand Prix, he now had to fly to Melbourne to face minor charges at a magistrates’ court.
He stayed at Melinda's house while she was on holidays in Queensland.

Later that month he was described by Warren Brunner, his new flatmate at Bondi, and the man who later raised the alarm to Bondi Police, as "very quiet". When Roni called his mother in Paris to tell her he'd received a $100 fine from the court, he seemed to pause when speaking. Friends began to notice he had trouble finishing sentences.

The night before he died Roni was invited to the home of two friends, Tina Dalton and Daniel Hagege. It was Sabbath eve.

Dalton had invited two Jewish doctors, Freddie and Caroline Atlani, who'd recently arrived from Paris. The conversation at the table that night moved in overlapping currents: English and French.
Roni, however, was most definitely not "himself" - in the words of Tina Dalton. He arrived about four in the afternoon. Freddie Atlani immediately felt he was preoccupied.
His halting speech put Atlani in mind of someone "embarrassed about something". Later, when Tina Dalton began to clear the plates, Roni followed her, stammering: "They, they, they."

"Who are they?" Dalton asked.
RL: "All of them."
TD: "Did someone do something to upset you?"
RL: "It's all of them. It's like my subconscious and conscious is all together."

His condition continued to deteriorate. When the others noticed he was having trouble pronouncing words, a collective decision was made by his companions to seek help, if only Roni was agreeable. He was.
At about 9:30 that night he was taken by Freddie Atlani and Daniel Hagege to St Vincent's

Hospital, Darlinghurst.

When Elizabeth Meagher examined Roni she found him to be "exceedingly pleasant", and his mood "quite happy". He smiled and laughed at her questions. She noted his smart dress and his rectangular, blackrimmed glasses. She seemed quite charmed.

Dr Meagher was keen to rule out organic causes before a thorough psychiatric assessment could be done, and ordered blood tests post haste. The only physical sign that something might have been awry was a slightly elevated blood pressure: 160-90. (In fact no physical or chemical abnormalities, not even in the autopsy, were ever found).

During the examination he interrupted Dr Meagher to ask: "Do you think thoughts can come down the telephone from one person to another?" When she said no, he agreed wholeheartedly. A few minutes later he asked about thoughts being transferred from one person to another across a room. Roni Levi was in "a confused state of fairly acute onset" concluded Dr Meagher.

Later that evening the medical registrar that evening, Frank Brennan, ordered psychiatric tests and a brain scan the very next day. Dr Brennan settled the patient down in his own cubicle, number 10, about 2:30am.

The next thing he heard - later that morning - was that Levi had left. At 4am Roni had tried to make a reverse charges call to Paris; half an hour later he was missing from his cubicle.

It was a young nurse, Katherine Armstrong, who saw the tragedy unravel. She assessed Levi on his arrival, noting his agitation and confusion. Later that night, she saw him being escorted down the corridor by Dr Meagher.

At 7.55 the next morning a young male with gunshot wounds was rushed to the trauma bays. He was registered as "Nathan Unknown". Karen Armstrong was there, at the end of her long shift, and she attempted to resuscitate him.

Only after his death did she and others recognize in the features of Nathan Unknown the face of Roni Levi. When he was rolled over to remove ambulance equipment a small metal object was found beside him and placed fastidiously by hospital staff in a specimen container. A bullet.

Of his movements between 5am and 6am, when he arrived at his Bondi apartment, little is

known. Most likely he just loped home along the switch-back streets of Darlinghurst, Paddington and Bondi in the still hours just before dawn.

He arrived at his apartment at 6am, sweating heavily, and tapped on the window. He returned half an hour later and grabbed a knife, then padded off down the street with it in his right hand. Brunner, who was following, dressed only in boxer shorts, ran panting to the police station at 6:50am.

At 6.58 Bondi One, Dilorenzo and Podesta's unit, crackles into life: "Radio we've got a job from the station. A male gone berserk with a knife. We have the informant with us." Two minutes later Paddington One chimes in: "We'll head over there and take a look." The chase has been joined.

Roni is seen walking in Ramsgate Avenue, supposedly heading towards Military Road. Soon after he's spotted running by North Bondi Surf Club. He makes a dash across the sand, headed surfwards. Something falls from his pocket - his glasses, never recovered.

Much has been made of an argument with Warren Brunner, and it was Brunner's appearance at the police station that set off the final chain of events. In fact he did not attempt to stab Brunner; he waved the kitchen knife at him and said: "This is not for you." Then he was gone.

Nor has any witness come forward from the beach to report that Roni had threatened them; his demeanour at the beach before he noticed the police suggests the knife was meant for one person only - himself.

The coroner's decision yesterday was a victory - albeit a pyrrhic one - for Roni's parents, Richard and Becky, and for Melinda Dundas. Her legal team from Newcastle University's legal centre have been working on a meagre stipend, effectively as legal aid. Her barrister Robert Cavanagh, also from Newcastle, was a stark contrast in court to counsel for the police, Jock Dailley, who was straight-backed, impeccably dressed, his collars a clerical white, his delivery clipped and to the point. Cavanagh on the other hand is tall and shambling presence with a Byronic profile, his suits invariably crumpled, his longish grey hair cut like no one else on the planet, his delivery cultivated to charm and to disarm.

Sitting next to Cavanagh was associate professor in law Ray Watterson, hemmed in by court documents when not weighed down by them. He would add fuel to Cavanagh's performance

with scribbled notes, new lines of attack somehow imbibed by the barrister in midflight during a tense cross-examination. This was something different: in fact much of the detailed research was done by Newcastle law students.

I asked Watterson one afternoon early in the case what on earth Roni was doing at Bondi Beach the morning he died.

"Here's a bloke who used to go down the beach to meditate," he replied, hunched and deliberate and determined to be heard above the din of a crowded restaurant. "So it means something to him. But in many respects it's also the Australian way - where do you go to when you're in trouble, depressed, burdened? You go to the beach.

And why did he plunge into the water up to his neck?

“I think he'd just had enough,” Watterson said. “Roni was going home." *

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