

Jersey Girl Sues F.B.I. Over Intercepted Letter

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NEWARK, July 24—A damage suite has been filed in Federal District Court here charging the Federal Bureau of Investigation with intercepting a letter written by a 15-year-old high school girl as part of a school project and with subsequently investigating her character and activities.

In addition to seeking \$65,000 in damages, the suit, which was filed by the Rutgers Constitutional Litigation Clinic and the American Civil Liberties Union of New Jersey, requests a court order forbidding the F.B.I. from intercepting or interfering with mail sent by citizens to lawful political organizations.

The plaintiffs in the suit are

Lori Paton of Chester, a pupil at West Morris-Mendham High School; her father, Arthur Paton, and William Gabrielson, chairman of the school's social studies department.

According to Frank Askin, a cooperating attorney of the A.C.L.U., the girl wrote a letter in February requesting information about the Socialist Labor party as part of a social studies project entitled "From left to right," which sought to explore various political ideologies.

"By mistake, she addressed the letter to the Young Socialist Alliance on Charles Street in New York," he said, "and

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the organization sent her its newspaper and other material. The Young Socialist Alliance is affiliated with the Socialist Workers party.

On March 28, according to the complaint, an F.B.I. agent visited Richard Matthews, principal of her school, and began inquiring about the girl's character interests. Mr. Matthews, who is on vacation and unavailable for comment, reportedly became concerned that a harmless school exercise could inspire an F.B.I. investigation, and he informed the American Civil Liberties Union of the visit.

Departure Was Quick

Lori Paton, who was at home today with her mother, Nancy Paton, said that Mr. Matthews had immediately summoned her and the social studies teacher in the hope that they would arrive before the agent left the school.

"The agent apparently thought I had graduated," she said. "When he heard I was still a student and the letter was part of a class exercise, he quickly dropped his questioning and left."

Lori said her initial reaction to the investigation was one of disbelief. "I couldn't fully un-

derstand what was happening," she said. "When I became aware of it, the thing that disturbed me most was that they were doing it behind my back."

"Although we want to be assured my name isn't on any lists, the main reason for the suit is the principle involved and the fact that this type of thing could really interfere with the educational process."

News of the visit caused a flurry of activity at the school. "The thing became blown up and was discussed at length in our history class and in the school newspaper," Lori said.

The girl said her decision to follow through with the litigation had been greeted by a mixed reaction on the part of her friends and classmates.

'Doing the Right Thing'

"Most of my friends said I was doing the right thing, and those who thought it should be dropped said they could understand my reasoning," she said. "The trouble is, I can't understand theirs."

Mrs. Paton said she was "a little shocked and angry" when she learned that her daughter was the target of an investigation, and said she supported Lori's decision to press the suit.

The girl said some of her classmates telephoned the

agent at his home to protest the investigation.

When it came time for the American Civil Liberties Union to draw up the papers, Mr. Matthews had misplaced the note with the agent's name and he is identified only as "John Doe."

The other defendants are J. Wallace La Prade, agent in charge of the Newark F.B.I. office, and Clarence M. Kelley, the F.B.I.'s new national director. The damages are sought from Mr. La Prade and the unidentified agent. Mr. Kelley's name was included for the purpose of the restraining order sought by the plaintiffs.

Constitutional Question

The suit charges the F.B.I.'s action violated the constitutional as well as a Federal statute prohibiting anyone from obstructing the mail or opening someone's mail to "pry into his business."

"I don't know of any exception written into the law for the F.B.I.," Mr. Askin said.

An F.B.I. spokesman at the Newark office said that Mr. La Prade would make no comment on the suit. The F.B.I. in Washington also declined to comment.

Stephen M. Nagler, executive director of the New Jersey American Civil Liberties

Union, said the F.B.I. investigation of the Paton girl was not an isolated case.

"We hear that a lot of that kind of thing goes on," he said, "but school officials handle it as a part of routine business. In this case we had a principal who was a little more sensitive."

Mr. Askin said he had written to Mr. La Prade asking for an explanation of the inquiries concerning the student, and received "a very guarded reply."

"He denied intercepting the letter but didn't say how they knew she had written it," Mr. Askin said.

Last week, lawyer for the Socialist Workers party and the Young Socialist Alliance announced the filing of a \$27-million damage suit in Federal Court in New York against President Nixon and other Government officials on charges of violating the organizations' constitutional rights.

The suit charges that the Government had engaged in a "systematic campaign of excessive interrogation, employment discrimination and other harassments that impaired the party's ability to participate effectively in Federal, state and local elections."