

# Sirhan---the Wanderer---Never

Jan 5, 1969 L.A. Times

## Life Background Told by Those Closest to Him

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In Arabic the name Sirhan means "wanderer."

In the little villages near Jerusalem—in what once was Palestine and is now Jordan and Israel—many distantly related families bear the name. Yet few people exemplify it as does Bishara Salameh Sirhan, now patriarch of a famous family.

Bishara, 55, has visited at least three times in the United States, where in 1957 he left his wife, Mary; daughter, Ayda, and three younger sons, Adel, Sirhan and Munir, and returned alone to Jordan, taking the family's money with him. In June of 1968, he and Mary were divorced, after 11 years of court action in which he accused her of infidelity. A priest called him a liar, and his own eldest sons, Sharif and Saidallah, testified that he tortured them by burning them with hot irons.

Today Bishara lives in his boyhood village of Taiyba, near Jerusalem, where he shuns his neighbors and they, in turn, repeat old stories of Sirhan family violence. Some of the stories are unquestionably false, but the villagers, significantly, believe them.

### Sirhan's Early Traumas

Though Bishara has not worked since 1957, he lives in one of the town's most substantial stone houses, and, at his death, he will go to the most imposing mausoleum in Taiyba's cemetery. Its portal stone proclaims in Arabic: "This is the tomb of Bishara Sirhan." There is no mention of his family.

Sirhan was born March 19, 1914, in Jerusalem's Russian Hospital.

Bishara is the sole informant about Sirhan's earliest years, and, though he did not say so immediately, in later interviews Bishara said Sirhan saw violence in the 1948

## Found His Way

"In 1948 he saw many things," says Bishara, "woundings and sufferings..."

Arab-Israeli war that was "traumatic" to him.

"In 1948 he saw many things," says Bishara, "woundings and sufferings . . . Sirhan was injured in the war"—not physically, but "in his head and heart."

The first such wound was inflicted, he says, when he and Sirhan went one day from their home in Jerusalem's Musrara sector to the post office in the Old Walled City, via the Damascus Gate, and an explosive-filled barrel was dropped near the gate and blew up. "The ground shook, the walls shook. Sirhan cried from his heart. He fell down. I thought he was dead, finished. I waited and after 20 minutes he opened his eyes. 'Daddy,' he said . . ." (Here Bishara hits the table, muttering in Arabic, and his eyes moisten; when he resumes talking, there is no audible emotion in his voice, however.)

"'Can you walk?' I asked him. He could not walk but he didn't want me to carry him, lest I get tired. Imagine! We saw the yard full of blood—about 40 or 50 killed. The yard was full of pieces of meat. 'Daddy, I don't want to see it,' he said, and I covered his eyes until we passed the sight. He was so frightened he spent two days in bed."

Describing the same incident another time, it is interesting to note, Bishara revealed that the explosion occurred before he had completed his errand. After Sirhan had re-



LIVED, Bishara went on with his business, and it was when he was taking Sirhan home, back through the bloody scene at the Damascus Gate, that Sirhan protested at the sight.

Another time, Bishara says, on another errand to the post office, a mortar shell exploded with such force nearby that Sirhan fell off a stairway, suffering a bruised cheek and bloody nose.

It was amid the explosions of shells that the family fled its tiny 7-by-10-foot room in Musrara in 1948, when Sirhan was 4. They hid in the room for two days and nights, Bishara recalls, while fighting raged in the city. Finally, he says, "a British officer told us to go, so we ran away without anything, no furniture, no clothing, no shoes."

They fled to the Old Walled City in Arab Jerusalem, moving into a house formerly occupied by Jews, while refugee Jews took sanctuary in their abandoned room in Musrara.

Bishara lost his job after this war and "it was very hard for two years," he says. "Then I went to Amman where I met a British major I had worked for here and he gave me a job on water supply in a Jordan army camp." This appears to have been Bishara's only steady job from 1948 until the family's move to America in 1957.

When first told of Kennedy's assassination, Bishara said, "I'm stupefied. I'm shocked. This is the blackest day of my life . . . I am

very sorry. I brought my children up as best I could and to fear God."

Sirhan, he said, "was a talented boy, more than his four brothers. How he came to this is beyond me." Sirhan was a "very gentle, polite, quiet and humble boy, interested mainly in books. It's beyond comprehension how he could have committed such a terrible act on his own initiative without having been put up to do it by some other people . . . My son was a good Christian all his life. He could not have done such a thing on his own. Someone must have pushed him into it."

"In Jerusalem," Bishara recalled, "the children were good, were satisfied." Had they ever required discipline, physical punishment per-

Sirhan was "religious, clever. Every Sunday he went to Sunday school. He prayed before going to bed."

haps? Bishara looked intent for a moment, then said, "Sometimes you had to beat them." But had he ever burned them with a hot iron? Bishara shook his head; no. And had he ever beaten Sirhan? "Sirhan was good. I never hit him," Bishara said.

The question is repeated later, and again he denies it, eyes darting from place to place: "No, never. Never . . . never . . ."

Then what of Sharif and Saidallah? Why had they left home in their early teens? "This is not important," said Bishara. "No one is perfect . . . I've seen many things in my life. People change the truth . . . Inside the family I don't want to speak about."

But one more question: why did he leave his family in America in 1957? "I came back because of my mother. She is 90," said Bishara, waving toward the village. But she does not live in the village, nor with Bishara; she lives next door, with a brother Bishara has not spoken to since 1953, and Bishara and his mother do not speak either.

As a child, Bishara said, Sirhan was "religious, clever. Every Sunday he went to Sunday school. He prayed before going to bed." Bishara added, as praise of his pious son, that "he never went out to play, never . . . I like Sirhan very much. The neighbors, teachers, they all said he was the best."

Sirhan was so well behaved and pious, Bishara said proudly, that he frequently disapproved of other

children's language. Sometimes he would bring a friend home and be a perfect host, but after the boy left, Sirhan would say, "that boy uses bad language. Don't ever let him in the house again."

After fleeing Musrara, the Sirhans moved into a building at the corner of El Malak Road and Suq el-Hussur Street, a poor but clean neighborhood in the Old Walled City. The building housed a store on the ground floor, a stone stairway to a



common toilet on the landing, and three rooms on the second floor. Each of the rooms was occupied by an entire family.

The Sirhans' room was a split level, 15-by-30-foot room, vast by contrast to their Musrara home. A rain reservoir on the roof was the water supply, the walls were unpainted, and a single kerosene lamp was the sole light. It had a domed ceiling and a grilled window overlooking the street.

Also moving into the house after the 1948 war were two Arab Muslim families—refugees from parts of Jerusalem that later became Israel—those of Amid Yousef Hashima and Esu Jubran.

#### 'A Very Secretive Family'

Mrs. Hashima remembers the Sirhans as "a very secretive family. They seldom spoke to others and they didn't allow their children to play in the street with others . . . The mother always talked about Jesus and religion." But, she adds, they didn't act superior to their neighbors, just aloof.

They never discussed family troubles with Mrs. Hashima, "but there were differences between him and his wife about the children. He kicked out the eldest sons and the mother didn't like it."

The Sirhans seemed poor at the beginning, Mrs. Hashima recalls, "but then the mother became a missionary. She spoke English very well. She was intelligent. She got gifts from the church for the family—clothes and games for the children."

In the early 1950s, she recalls, Mary Sirhan was no longer a pretty woman, after a disease caused her lower lip to pull to one side. Mrs. Hashima says she thought Bishara wanted to divorce Mary after her disfigurement, although there was never any talk of another woman.

Sirhan, she says, was definitely Bishara's favorite, and "you respected Sirhan when he talked. He was not a boy in his head." But he was weak and thin—she recalls once when he was hospitalized with dysentery—and didn't play in street games.

"Sometimes I saw the boy go out dressed in a scout uniform," she

recalls. "I once asked Mary to let my sons play with him to listen to his good English and learn, but she said 'no time.'"

The Sirhan children went to the church-operated Lutheran school, better than the public school where neighbor children went, and Sirhan "was very good in writing and reading, clever. He stayed in the

house, didn't play with other boys. The children didn't speak in the house. They were afraid of the father."

"They were a confused family," says Mrs. Jubran. "No one knew what was between Mary and Bishara." She often heard Bishara shouting at his wife.

"I don't know where they got money," she says. "Mary gave gifts to small children, but only to Christian children. She just worked for her own religion . . . When any neighbors needed help, Mary would help them, but she only gave gifts and money to Christian children . . . Ayda was the best one of the family," she says, but adds, "I liked Mary."

And Sirhan? "The father did not allow Sirhan to go out of the house. All of them were afraid of the father. He turned the house into a jail for them . . . The father always made Sirhan afraid. The boy was not well in his mind. He was a complicated boy."

Did he ever talk about the 1948 war experiences Bishara described? No, says Mrs. Jubran, "none of them ever mentioned them." And did Bishara appear to favor Sirhan over the other children? "He hit them all the same. He had a heart of stone."

#### A Sickly, Nervous Boy

Mrs. Jubran's husband, Esu, recalls Sirhan as a dark-skinned, sickly and nervous boy who, "when he wasn't yelling at his sister and brothers would sit with his mind away."

Mary was very protective, Jubran remembers, and Sirhan seemed older than his years. "When he talked," says Jubran, "it felt like he was not 11 years old."

Jubran also remembers a bomb explosion in 1954, when the shopkeeper on the floor below was killed. "I don't know if Sirhan saw it actually happen," he says, "but I saw him in the crowd right afterward." And from then on, says Jubran, Sirhan seemed changed. "He quarreled with my children and fought . . . He played rough when his father was away. I complained sometimes to Bishara and the father hit him hard."

Another neighbor, Mrs. Laila Said, recalls that Bishara used to lock Ayda in their room and her friends would have to bring food to her. Once, she says, Bishara chained her to the grilled window.

She says Bishara used to discipline the boys with cruel beatings, once beating one of the sons until he lost consciousness and chasing away the neighbors when they tried to rescue



the boy.

It was in late 1948 that the Rev. Daoud Haddad, pastor of the Lutheran Church of the Savior, was asked to look in on the Sirhan family. "It was a wretched house," he says, "no chairs, nothing. They were very poor, so we accepted an elder brother (Saidallah) and the sister in the school without tuition. Later we accepted more of the children, and through them got better acquainted with the family.

#### Father Seen as 'Odd'

"I realized the father was an odd father, nervous, with fits of temper, often getting angry at his wife. The family's life was not happy because of the moody, rude father . . . Every now and then he hit the mother. She was running about, asking people for work. He did not work. This may throw light, or perhaps a shadow, on the character of the children who had such a family life."

Mr. Haddad says the church provided the Sirhans with perhaps 25 percent of their food and clothing until 1956, when Mary became more interested in missionary work.

But during those years, Mr. Haddad formed a strong impression of young Sirhan: "Sirhan was a quiet boy, intelligent, although his grades were not the best. You could read in his eyes that he was alert. But he was unquiet, a bit nervous. He was a clever boy—very quick—but unstable and very unhappy. I remember thinking that he would have a very difficult time later in life because the family he grew up in lacked the basic things a boy needs to understand life."

#### Made Acceptable Grades

Mr. Haddad says he never heard of unusual tortures inflicted on the children but said, "Bishara had frequent violent fits and was given to breaking what little furniture they had, and beating the children. He thrashed them with sticks and his fists whenever they disobeyed him. Young Sirhan seemed to have some of this violence in him. He was thin and nervous and inclined to sudden bursts of temper. At other times he was oddly quiet for long periods.

"Mary was the dominant parent," he says, "but she was harsh herself. She was terribly narrow-minded and rigid in religious matters, but she loved the children in her way and she managed to hold the family together."

Sirhan attended the Lutheran school from kindergarten through the fifth grade, leaving in the summer of 1956, when he had turned 12. His grades were not the

best in the class, but nonetheless good. In the first grade he stood fifth among 26 students, and in the fifth grade he was seventh in a class of 16. His grades that year were: religion, 80; Arabic, 74; geometry, 73; singing, 73; science, 72; English, 70; geography, 68; history, 67; hygiene, 63; drawing, 61, and arithmetic, 60. As to citizenship, he was rated 75 in conduct, 75 in intelligence and 70 in cleanliness.

His teacher, Salim Awad, notes that the record says of Sirhan: "Good in subjects and character, satisfactory in cleanliness . . . Should be passed."

One of Sirhan's school friends from 1951 to 1956 was Wahib Hashwieh, who says today:

"Sirhan had a good sense of humor. The teacher might say something foolish and Sirhan would say something clever to us." These remarks were usually at the teacher's expense, he said "and sometimes the teacher would say, 'Look at this small boy, how clever he is.'"

But it was in a spirit of fun,

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Hashwieh said, and Sirhan was generally held up as a good example to the class. Although among the smallest, Sirhan was also among the oldest—Hashwieh was 3 years younger—and evidently applied himself well.

Hashwieh says Sirhan never talked about any experiences in the then-recent 1948 war, nor did he ever complain about his father.

But another acquaintance does recall one incident involving Bishara.

Seim Ratas, 4 years older than Sirhan, was a neighbor. Says Ratas: "I remember once that Sirhan had to go to school without shoes. I saw him walking barefoot. He said it was because his father had beat him, like he did the other children, and that he took a piece of iron, heated it on the stove and put it on the boy's heel. He couldn't wear shoes then."

Sirhan, Ratas recalls, "was not well, not strong. Sometimes he wouldn't go to school for a week because he was sick. Wherever his mother went, he went—to the market, to church, visiting. He was a mother's boy."

In the summer of 1956, Bishara and Mary began to think of going to America. Sirhan did not



return to the Lutheran school in the fall, and on Dec. 14 the family left Jerusalem, thanks to the American missionary couple Bishara had asked to "save a family from the darkness." Their expenses were also partially paid by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency. The eldest sons, Sharif and Saidallah, by then were living in Amman and would not follow for three years.

Mary's sisters, Julia and Elaine, recall that when the family left the ancient city for a new life in the new world, "Mary didn't say goodbye when she left. Her husband refused to let her see us." And after Mary arrived in America, she never wrote.

#### Father Stayed in East

Four days after their arrival in New York the Sirhans went on to Pasadena, home city of the missionary couple who had befriended them in Jerusalem.

Differences between Bishara and Mary came rapidly to a head, and since he had found himself a good job in an east coast defense plant, it was left to Mary to find a home for herself, her daughter and three sons.

Mary found a small, cream-colored, three-bedroom frame house on Howard St., one of Pasadena's older, lower-middle-income residential streets. Like most of the houses nearby, it is about 50 years old, set well back on its lot under tall shade trees. It is an inviting setting for children to play in and the street, now racially mixed, rings daily with the shouts of children of all sizes and colors.

But it was always very quiet around the Sirhan home, says a neighbor. She, of European background, says other neighbors were

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very cold, even belligerent, to her sometimes, and to the Sirhans as well, so the Sirhans kept mostly to themselves. There were no parties, few visitors, and she recalls seeing Sirhan playing occasionally with another neighbor's collie dog or puttering in the yard, washing the car or doing some gardening—an activity which pleased both him and his mother.

The Sirhans were no more warmly received elsewhere.

The Arab community is among the smaller of Southern California's many ethnic populations, numbering between 20,000



**THE PATRIARCH**—Bishara Sirhan, head of his family, states in his village near Jerusalem that son Sirhan suffered traumatic experiences in Arab-Israeli war in 1948.

(AP photo)

and 30,000, and is overwhelmingly Lebanese and Syrian. Most of these immigrated to America before World War I, found Southern California to be much like their homeland, and now, well into a second and third generation, are comfortably integrated into an affluent American culture which they are coming more and more to regard as native. There are no predominantly Arab neighborhoods, as one might find in New York; they are widely scattered throughout Southern California.

#### Family Without Father

In this formless Arab "community," the Sirhans were different, set apart. They were newly arrived and unfamiliar with their new surroundings. They were noticeably dark-skinned. When they spoke English, it was heavily accented and halting, and among themselves, at home, they clung to Arabic. They were poor. And among a people in whom the patriarchal tradition is strong, they were a family without a father.

For their part, the Sirhans found little to entice them out of their constricted new world. There were only about 50 Jordanian families throughout the entire Los Angeles area, most of them already embarked on American lives of their own.

There were a very few Arab nightclubs where one might watch dancers and hear one's native music and speech, but Mrs. Sirhan sharply disapproved of these. Her family neither drank nor smoked, nor did they frequent places where other people did.

There was no Greek Orthodox church nearby. Most of that faith went to the Syrian Orthodox Cathedral, St. Nicholas, in Los Angeles. The Sirhans made the inconvenient trip a few times at the beginning, but these trips soon tapered off. Father Paul Romley recalls them as "always humble and



aloof."

Others have noted this aloofness in the Sirhans, and it is not difficult to understand. In their homeland they had been an upright, Christian family, among the best educated of their class, once accustomed to financial security but uncomplaining and industrious in hard times.

#### All Appear Introverted

Moreover, a quarter-century of marriage to a man like Bishara had failed to break Mary's spirit. She was not a whiner, but a tight-lipped, proud, strong woman. And where her family had been noted for its privacy and silence among old acquaintances in Jerusalem, it is hardly surprising that among strangers in Pasadena they turned in on themselves even more, mending their griefs privately, trusting and confiding in few.

It is this aloofness which, while being one of the family's strengths, perhaps contributed most toward introverting the Sirhans in their new environment, in effect creating a social and cultural vacuum in which the children would have to develop as best they could, and would have to build their futures upon an emotionally impoverished past.

Mary, concerned as ever for the children's religious faith, had difficulty finding a church that suited her taste. First she tried the church of their family's benefactors, the First Nazarene Church of Pasadena, but after about a month they stopped going

Then there were the sporadic visits to the Syrian Orthodox Cathedral.

Then she took up the First Baptist Church in Pasadena, even enrolling Sirhan, her brightest and most devout child, in the Sunday school and group of young teens. But here, as in Jerusalem years before, the serious young Sirhan was offended by the conduct of his peers. He complained about the

other youngsters' inactivity; they held hands and giggled, while he felt that church was a place for praying and reading the Bible.

They remained with the Baptists for a few years, and in late June, 1960, this church sponsored the entry into the United States of Sharif and Saidallah, by then in their late 20s.

The older brothers, long accustomed to living away from the family, soon took quarters by themselves, Saidallah in an apartment nearby, Sharif in Highland Park.

#### Uses Nickname

Sirhan, meanwhile, now known by his mother's nickname of "Sol," was a student, first at Longfellow Elementary School for sixth grade, where a friend now recalls, "He was a very hard worker after school—sold papers, swept out a coffee shop nearby. My parents tried often to have me behave like him, he was so polite."

But even so, Sirhan was different from his schoolmates. Scholastically he was behind the American school system, although two years older than his classmates. This, in addition to his small size, dark skin and accented English made him an easy target for youngsters' gibes.

By the time he moved on to Eliot Junior High School, his pattern of social conduct was unalterably fixed, never to change significantly in the years ahead. A friend at that time recalls him only as a "loner who stayed to himself a lot." When they were graduated from junior high, Sirhan signed the friend's yearbook in Arabic; the friend couldn't translate Sirhan's message, but the point was, it was distinctive, something only Sirhan could do.

#### Situation Improves

Outwardly, things were going well for the Sirhans in the early 1960s. Sirhan was doing well in his studies, getting "A" and "B" grades without visible effort and working after school. Ayda was an accountant. Saidallah worked occasionally as a

house painter, and Adel, despite resistance from Mary, got a night job at the Fez. Sharif was an accountant for the California Baptist Convention, and Mary found a \$195-a-month job as housekeeper for the nursery school in Pasadena's Westminster Presbyterian Church. The family bought the house they had been renting, and though their payments were sometimes late, they managed to hang onto it.

But behind the facade the Sirhans had erected against the world, things were not so smooth. Pasadena police were becoming acquainted with the Sirhan brothers.

Least seriously involved with the police was Saidallah, now 36, who in 1966 was convicted in Pasadena Municipal Court of being drunk in a public place. He also is said to have accumulated a number of traffic violations, in sufficient number that in June of 1963—only two days after the Kennedy assassination—his scheduled naturalization as a U.S. citizen was cancelled indefinitely and his traffic record was cited as meriting further investigation.

The youngest son, Munir, now 21, had progressively failing eyesight, a worry to him and his family. One day in 1963, when he was 15, he sneaked away in Saidallah's car and promptly smashed into a telephone pole because he could not see well enough to drive.

Three years later, in May, 1966 Munir was arrested in Flagstaff, Ariz., and pleaded guilty to a vagrancy charge. He couldn't meet bail and served 15 days in jail.

The next month, he was arrested and charged with

possession and sale of marijuana to an undercover narcotics agent. In October he was convicted and sentenced to five years' probation—one year to be served in jail—but early in 1967 the conviction was set aside since he was a juvenile at



the time. Deportation proceedings against Aluni were dropped in mid-1963, after his appeal on grounds that his was a juvenile offense.

Most seriously involved with the police was the eldest, Sharif, now 37. In May, 1963, Sharif was in an auto accident and suffered whiplash injuries to his back, neck and head. His supervisor in the Baptist accounting office, George Matas, said Sharif seemed to "withdraw from the group and from society. He complained of headaches, said his eyes hurt. His work deteriorated. We finally had to let him go."

The family was so embittered at Sharif's dismissal that they quit the Baptist church. That was in December. That same month, Sharif was arrested and charged with attempted murder after a romance which went on the rocks.

One Dec. 18, Sharif was arrested while in the act of sawing through the hydraulic brake lines of his girl friend's car. He was convicted of tampering with the auto and placed on one year's probation.

Ayda, meanwhile, in a surprisingly independent move for an Arab daughter, had gone off alone to Palm Springs, to work in a date shop run by a man named Mennell. Mary was closest to Ayda and opposed the move, but Ayda, in her mid-20s, was apparently possessed of

"His children did not speak in the house. They were afraid of the father."

some of Mary's own strength and determination.

She married Mennell, several years her senior, in 1961, and when she revealed the marriage to her family, a bitter scene

ensued. Sharif, the eldest male, beat his wilful sister with a shoe, and Ayda fled.

Ayda later died of leukemia, and Sharif, a friend said, was so overcome with remorse that "he cried like a baby."

Throughout this period of the family's life, Sirhan was the least outgoing but most promising of the sons. It was Sirhan who would put the family on the map, everyone agreed: he was serious-minded, religious, polite, devoted to his mother, absorbed in books. One neighbor recalls he thought he might go into dentistry. Another felt he was better suited to a more intellectual pursuit—teaching, perhaps, or religious work.

It is a curious facet of Sirhan's personality that by that time—insofar as it is recalled by his acquaintances—he had a peculiar facility for showing only certain sides of his nature to certain groups of people—and never very much to anyone. The recollections different persons have

about Sirhan are strangely flat and one-dimensional, dissimilar in content but strikingly similar in their lack of emotional force.

The heart-to-heart talks normal to adolescents apparently were not for him. With some family friends, for instance, he never discussed politics, yet with school friends he rarely discussed anything else.

His grades at John Muir High School were good and classmates remember him as very smart, very quiet, inclined to be somewhat competitive and given to discouragement when bested.

One of his better friends was Curtis Townsend, a Negro who lived not far away.

"He was a smart boy," says Townsend. "He caught on quick. We ran around with an interracial group, and we used to have contests to see who could get the highest

grades on tests. He got discouraged if he didn't win."

Townsend also recalls how "a kid teased him because he often showed up at school with mixed pairs of socks—each of a different color—and Sirhan told him to lay off. He'd speak up if he was crossed. But it was funny, he was always doing something like that, maybe out of absentmindedness. Like in sports, for instance, kids made fun of him because he'd show up for sports, him with his 30-inch waist in 36 trousers. He'd just look funny."

Sirhan used to talk of going back to Jordan someday, Townsend says, and "he gave me the impression that when he got back to Jordan he'd be somebody big—a prince or something. He used to talk about going back to help his people."

Throughout his entire time in high school, Townsend says, he cannot recall a single girl Sirhan ever dated or expressed an interest in, with one possible exception. However, this girl, when interviewed, said she not only never had dated Sirhan but could not recall him at all.

#### Mideast History

A girl in Sirhan's history class recalls that that was one of his better subjects and that he often used to come to class early or stay late to talk to the history teacher, Darwin Russell. Sirhan's card at the Pasadena Public Library bears out this observation; almost all of the books he checked out dealt with the Middle East.

William Spaniard, now in Saigon, recalls that Sirhan was "a taciturn individual who didn't say very much; friendly, really pleasant, but hard to get to know. He was brilliant. He was studying Russian when everyone else was barely getting by in Spanish and English."

Swedish foreign exchange student Christian Ek—now in Stockholm—says Sirhan "dreamed of being something big in



Jordan after his studies in the United States. He was a calm, well-mannered boy, nothing evil about him." But Robert Chase, now of Glendale, remembers him as "so quiet and such a weirdie that at assemblies he wouldn't stand for the National Anthem."

Still another classmate, now in Mexico City, says Sirhan was "always so shy you hardly knew he was there. He sat in the back

of the class, never saying much of anything."

When Sirhan did say anything, others recall, it was almost always on the subject of politics, civil rights or, most often, the Middle East. Then, they say, he would become impassioned and make bitterly anti-Zionist statements.

Because of his lack of stature, Sirhan was not good at sports and disliked physical education classes, so he switched to R.O.T.C. He also was a member of the junior and senior class councils at John Muir and is remembered by John McGrain, president of the council, as a likable fellow who seemed left out.

In the fall of 1963, Sirhan went on to Pasadena City College, a two-year institution that fell short of his dream of a college career. His grades continued to be above average.

His social life continued to be almost non-existent, consisting mainly of occasional cups of coffee with students at a hamburger place across from the campus.

Occasionally Adel, now 30, would take Sirhan with him to the Fez, where Sirhan would play the tamboura, a kind of drum. But these visits were infrequent, since Sirhan didn't date and his mother disapproved of nightclubs.

There were only two fleeting encounters with girls at this period. At PCC he became interested in a girl named Gwendo-

lyn Gum and phoned her a few times for dates, but she was always busy. At one school carnival he sought to impress Gwendolyn, who was running a booth, by buying \$10 worth of votes from her at a penny a vote. Nothing happened. She never dated him.

#### Names in Diary

On another occasion, when he and others were in Newport Beach, Sirhan bought a soft drink for a girl named Peggy Ostercamp. That was the extent of his outward involvement with her.

Inwardly, Sirhan evidently fantasied these encounters as hopeful signs. He was in the habit of keeping an informal diary, and both girls' names are written in it, with names of other people Sirhan either wished or imagined were his friends.

From his late teens into college, he also attended meetings of the Organization of Arab Students, a loosely organized group whose status fluctuated from burgeoning to defunct, largely in response to the changing enthusiasms of its student membership. The group in Pasadena now is disbanded.

Sam Farraj, a Jordanian—now a medical lab technician living in Arcadia—has known the Sirhan family for many years. He knew Saidallah in Jerusalem and was once a close friend of Sharif Sirhan. Adel and Sharif used to attend OAS meetings, Farraj says, and he recalls that Sirhan was an ardent nationalist, extremely an-

ti-Zionist but not, he stresses, anti-Jewish.

At some point in late 1964 or early 1965, Sirhan's dreams of education and a profession began to fade and his studies took a sharp turn for the worse. By the end of his second year at PCC he was flunk-



**A MOTHER'S TEARS**—Mrs. Mary Sirhan, weeping in the arms of a neighbor, Mrs. Clarence C. Robinson, believed that her son Sirhan was the most promising of her children. Mrs. Sirhan attempted to keep her family together despite a divorce from her husband.

ing every subject, and on the advice of a teacher, he dropped out of school. Once the fairest hope of his family, he now was not even qualified to continue his education at an upper division university.

What triggered this precipitous change in the grades that had always meant so much to him is not known. During this time Ayda's illness was wasting her life, and in March of 1965 she died. Perhaps the loss of his strong-willed, self-sufficient sister was more than he could withstand. But perhaps not, for emotional bonds among the Sirhan family were never the subject of outside discussion. From this time on, however, Sirhan was no longer the serious, scholarly boy.

For a while he worked at filling stations, but then



another plan came to him. He had long been fond of horse racing, often spending afternoons at Santa Anita, where he would bet freely, sometimes losing every nickel, sometimes winning heavily.

So he decided to become a jockey. He had always been poor in sports, but as a jockey his lack of size would be an advantage. Perhaps it crossed his mind that successful jockeys were not made to feel unmanly, however small they were.

As a first step, Sirhan got a state license as an exercise boy and a "hot walker"—one who walks horses around to cool them down after a workout. He took a job at the Granja Vista del Rio ranch near Corona in the summer of 1966. But in September he fell from a horse and landed on his head.

Sirhan was "generally banged up" from the fall, one doctor said, and was hospitalized overnight for observation. At that time,

no major injury was noted, but Sirhan soon complained of impaired eyesight and insisted upon further treatment.

An ophthalmologist examined Sirhan in November and December, after Sirhan had complained of pain and blurred vision, but tests showed nothing wrong with Sirhan's eyes. When the doctor refused to write a letter confirming the alleged eye injury, he said Sirhan threatened him.

In July of 1967, no longer at the ranch, Sirhan filed a disability claim for workmen's compensation. The insurance firm, rather than dispute the claim, settled out of court for \$2,000. In February, 1968, after paying medical and legal fees, Sirhan had a nest egg of \$1,700—and no further hope of being a jockey.

Sirhan's fall is reminiscent of Sharif's 1963 auto accident, in light of the fact that Mary has since

said Sirhan's behavior changed after the fall. "He didn't seem to be hurt too bad, I mean physically," she said. "But he changed

"He was a clever boy — very quick — but unstable and very unhappy . . ."

somehow. After that accident, we seemed not so close any more. I couldn't even get through to him when we talked."

Whether or not Sirhan incurred some barely detectable but nonetheless affective brain damage is the subject of much speculation today. A defense attorney has indicated this possibility will be exhaustively probed.

For several months after leaving the ranch, Sirhan didn't work. Finally Mary appealed on his behalf to John Weidner, owner of a Pasadena health food shop, and in late 1967 Weidner gave Sirhan a job as stock and delivery boy at \$2 an hour.

Weidner found his new

employee bright, pleasant and witty, eager to please and so honest that he soon trusted Sirhan to make bank deposits.

But he also found him quick to resent what he construed as criticism of his work. "He was a proud man with a good opinion of himself," says Weidner, adding that Sirhan visibly resented authority.

Weidner's wife, Naomi, adds "He had a lot of pride, a lot of arrogance. We were always careful how we gave him an order. If you gave him an order he didn't like he became very resentful."

Weidner, a Dutch World War II veteran who worked in the underground saving Jews from the Nazis, took a more

than routine interest in the nationalistic young immigrant, and when business was slow he would lead Sirhan into conversation.

"I think he was a man of revolt," says Weidner. "He was a kind of anarchist against society, against law and order, against those who possess. Against those who have more than he has and are more successful in life." He says that when they discussed civil rights and racial disorder, Sirhan would say, "In America, freedom does not exist. I agree with the violence."

#### Atheistic Views

Sirhan also expressed dislike for wealthy people, said Weidner, and "a real hatred for Jews. He said the Jewish people were rich and had taken his country, so he was very angry against them."

When Weidner said Sirhan should try to forgive injustice, Sirhan answered, "I would like to be like you but I cannot."

And once, in a discussion of religion, Sirhan told Weidner, "There is no God. You see in Israel what happens to the Arab. There is no God. How can you have a God?"

Sirhan at this point had begun to explore theosophy and somehow became attracted to the Rosicrucian

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ans, or Ancient Mystical Order of the Rosae Crucis, which sells mail-order courses which purport to help one unlock the psychic powers of the mind. He also corresponded with a mystically inclined man in Napa—whose identity and whereabouts are presently unknown—who confided to some theosophist friends after the Kennedy assassination that the tone of Sirhan's letters had caused him to be fearful months before that Sirhan's mental health was





**AT ARRAIGNMENT**—Sirhan B. Sirhan is taken by officers into court for arraignment hours after the shooting of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy at Ambassador.  
Times photo

perhaps endangered as a result of uninformed dabbling with mystical concepts.

Mysticism aside, Sirhan evidently had not repudiated conventional religion as thoroughly as his brash arguments with Weidner would indicate. In his jail cell he still prays to the Christian God with his mother.

Adding fuel to his arguments with Weidner was the still-recent six-day war in which Israel so humiliated her Arab adversaries. Sirhan often

"I saw him walking barefoot. He said it was because his father had beat him . . . and that he took a piece of iron, heated it on the stove and put it on the boy's heel . . ."

equated the Jews' victory with the Nazis' treatment of Jews and demanded: "You think the Jews can't be cruel, too?"

Mrs. Weidner also talked with Sirhan, and she re-

calls one particularly memorable story. "I'm going to tell you something I've never told anyone, not even my parents," she quotes Sirhan as saying. "When I was small, I saw an Israeli soldier cut off the breasts of an Arab woman."

#### No Evidence

There is no evidence that he ever did tell this story, or any other, to anyone else. It is also interesting to note that of the several atrocities Bishara said his son witnessed, this one was not among them.

In March, 1968, a month after getting his disability claim, Sirhan and the Weidners fell out. There was a dispute about some order Weidner gave him. Sirhan insisted he had been called a liar. Weidner insisted he meant no such thing and attempted to patch it up, even going to Sirhan's home to talk it over. Sirhan was adamant and quit his job.

Soon after, he filed a claim for severance before the Labor Relations Board, but he lost the claim.

Meanwhile, he was still the model neighbor youth, dropping in on Mrs. Olive Blakeslee for games of Chinese checkers, talking

with Mrs. Martin Runte about how to plant a garden for his mother, or visiting with Linda Massri, a longtime family friend, about religion, psychology and books.

"We used to talk about Freud," says Mrs. Massri, herself American-born but of Syrian parentage. "We'd talk about the psychological motivations for people's actions, and Sirhan would say that God was in a person's mind."

She was especially close to Sirhan, she says. "He was like a little brother to me . . . I don't know where the reports of Sirhan's violent hatred toward the Israelis came from. He never discussed such feelings with me as long as I knew him. I could see all the nice things in his character. He was especially good to his mother; he was always with her. He was a well-educated and well-behaved boy, an intellectual."

And neither did Sirhan ever discuss his father with Mrs. Massri, she says, but after the assassination she wondered at some length about his feelings toward Bishara. On the day of the shooting, a badly shaken Saidallah came to see her, she says, and told her, "My father was a second Hitler."

#### Failed in Hopes

As the summer of 1968 drew near, Sirhan had little to look forward to. He had failed to achieve his hopes through education, his dream of becoming a jockey had turned into a bitter joke, and even jobs that he had felt beneath him had fallen by the wayside.

All he had left was the remainder of his disability claim, which he had given to his mother for safekeeping, and for which he had to argue every time he wanted money, because she feared he would waste it.

He pattered around the house, read the newspa-



pers regularly, followed the continuing ferment in the Middle East and was interested in the accelerating political campaign here. In late April the two interests converged in a political column in which Sen. Kennedy was criticized for his support of the Israeli cause. Sirhan cut out the column and put it in his wallet.

#### The Fatal Day

He also jotted down his own political thoughts, we are told, in a couple of stenographic notebooks, anti-Israeli, pro-Arab thoughts — and sometime about the middle of May the notation that Kennedy must die before June 5.

On the morning of Tuesday, June 4 — election day — Sirhan lounged around the house for most of the morning. He was at home when his mother left for work at 8 a.m. and he was still there around noon.

By early afternoon he was at the pistol range of the San Gabriel Valley Gun Club, where he practiced rapid firing of several hundred rounds until about 5 p.m.

#### Met Acquaintance

Then he drifted over to Bob's Big Boy hamburger stand, next to PCC, where he met a casual acquaintance, also an Arab, named Gaymoard Mistri. After talking for a while they walked over to the PCC cafeteria, where they met three more of Sirhan's slight acquaintances, Abdul Jabra Malki, Marouf Badran and Anour Saigh.

None of the four knew Sirhan well enough to sense his real frame of mind — for no one had ever known him well — but he seemed, they said, to be in a good mood. They chatted desultorily about nothing special until about 7:15, when the others had to excuse themselves and go to evening classes.

Sirhan waved a casual good night and strolled off into the early evening toward his car.

The polls would be closing soon, the voting would be over. All but his. It was time he was getting to the Ambassador.



Last spring, about the time the leaves were budding, a man decided to test that recurrent, highest promise of the American dream. He decided to run for President.

Robert Francis Kennedy was fortune's darling, some said. Son of one of America's wealthiest families, influential senator, brother to a martyred President and, as the martyr took on the lineaments of folk-hero, heir to an incomparably rich political legacy of goodwill and sympathy. He was the new exponent of the legendary Kennedy mystique, idealism's new standard-bearer, the new champion of the poor.

Now it is winter, the world is no newer, and those same leaves have long since fallen on a hillside in Virginia, skittering drily across the grave of Robert Francis Kennedy. Alongside the brother whose dreams he shared and from whose torch he took his fire, Robert Kennedy also faces now the city that was Camelot to both. The season advances, the world rolls, the people have selected another, not Kennedy.

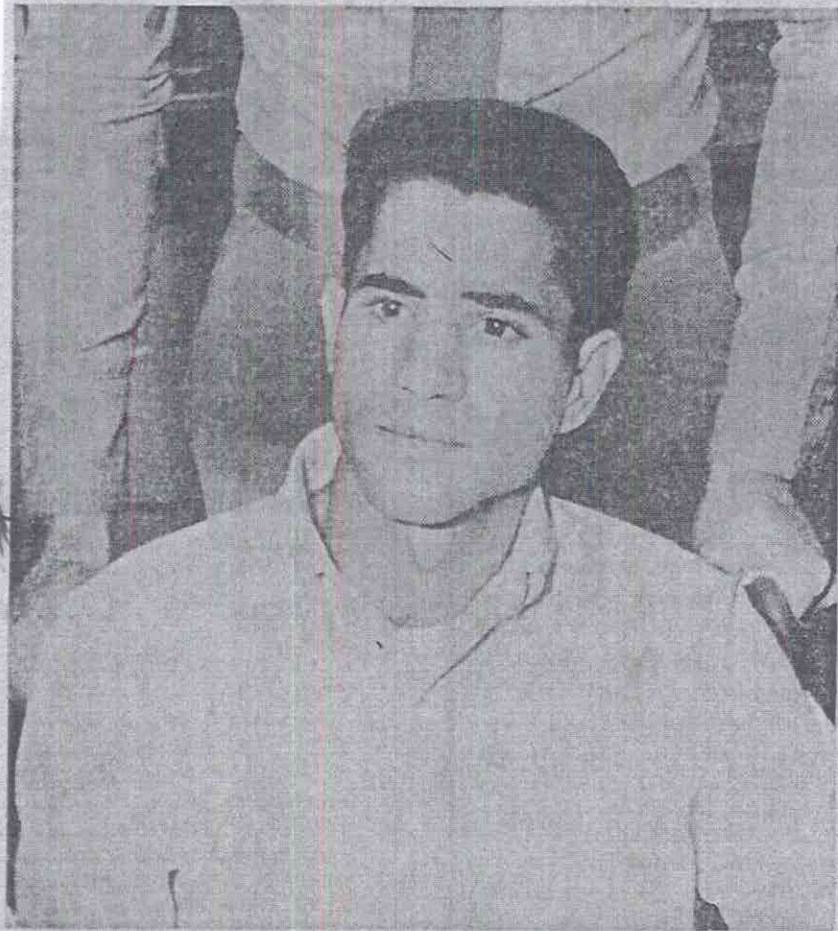
And in the night, when the wind blows across the Potomac River and up the forlorn Arlington hillside of the dead, Robert's grave is lit by the fitful flicker of the eternal flame that burns above John, but shares the light.

One man decided that Robert F. Kennedy should not be President of the United States. The voters who might have elected him were disenfranchised by a gun. Hopes were pinned elsewhere or abandoned, old allegiances forgotten, new ones made—all because of one little man with a .22 pistol.

The assassin's name is Sirhan Bishara Sirhan, and though he has pleaded innocent, that he shot Kennedy is beyond dispute; he was seized before he finished shooting. What is pertinent, and what the defense will hinge upon, his attorney says, is "Why did he do it? Is he responsible?"

These questions may one day be answered, hopefully at Sirhan's trial which opens Tuesday. It would be socially profitable for us to know.





**HIS NAME MEANS 'WANDERER'**—He was injured in the war between the Arabs and Israelis in 1948, his father says of Sirhan Sirhan, not physically, but "woundings, sufferings in his head and heart."

Times photo