



Associated Press

Sirhan: A matter of life or death

TRIALS:

The Wanderer

He was born in Jerusalem, raised on Christian charity and corporal punishment, washed ashore in the U.S. twelve years ago and cast down, by choice or mad chance, in a drab serving pantry in Los Angeles's Ambassador Hotel the night Robert Kennedy won his last primary. Sirhan Bishara Sirhan always seemed a piece of damaged goods—a lonely, moody, rootless young man afire with Arab nationalism and Rosicrucian mysticism run together in some private harmony. Now, as Sirhan prepared to go on trial for Kennedy's murder in a cordoned, armor-plated Los Angeles courtroom this week, the central question is likely to be whether the damage was real or only metaphorical. Sirhan's life, in the end, may depend on the answer.

There is no mystery at all about who pulled the trigger. Kennedy was shot, and Sirhan instantly gang-tackled and disarmed, in a roomful of eyewitnesses. His lawyers, moreover, decided against trying to prove that Sirhan didn't know what he was doing or that he couldn't tell right from wrong—the only bases for a verdict of not guilty by reason of insanity under the rigid old M'Naghten rule still in force in California (and most of the U.S.). The likely defense strategy instead was to try to save Sirhan from the gas chamber by showing him mentally incapable of premeditating the shooting—a partial defense that could knock down the charge from first-degree murder (which involves premeditation) to second-degree murder or manslaughter (which do not). "We're not kidding ourselves about a not-guilty verdict," a defense investigator told NEWSWEEK's Martin Kasindorf, "but we're hopeful of getting less than the death penalty."

Witnesses: In this effort, Sirhan's defenders will be up against a tough prosecution team headed by the Los Angeles D.A.'s chief trial deputy, Lynn D. (Buck) Compton, a gruff man who played guard on UCLA's 1943 Rose Bowl team. Out of a list of 4,300 persons questioned by police and the FBI, Compton and his men expect to call 70 or 80 witnesses, probably including black athletes Roosevelt Crier and Rafer Johnson, possibly writer George Plimpton—but not Ethel or any other Kennedy. Some of these witnesses will testify to the shooting itself, with the state plotting the events for the jury in a police-built wooden scale model of the hotel kitchen area. Others scheduled to testify include a gun-shop owner who sold Sirhan ammunition on June 1, several persons who saw him practice rapid firing on a target range on June 4 and a waiter who saw Sirhan in the kitchen area half an hour before the shooting on the early morning of June 5—all important pieces in the state's effort to prove premeditation. Compton's men also are likely to introduce the celebrated spiral-bound journals—trumpeted by Mayor Sam Yorty shortly after the assassination—in which Sirhan is said to have set down his deadly hard feelings against Kennedy.

Sirhan's volunteer defense—headed by low-key Grant Cooper, and also starring 73-year-old veteran Russell E. Parsons and flashy New York trial lawyer Emile Zola Berman—will counter by painting Sirhan, 24, as a volatile loner controlled not by will but by impulse. They have put together a three-volume, 751-page biography of Sirhan (including 151 pages analyzing his zigzag reading habits) and have lined up 20 or 25 witnesses, among them two psychiatrists, a psychologist, members of Sirhan's broken family—and, quite possibly, Sirhan himself. (He wants to talk, and the defense might well decide to give the jury a look at his stormy, mercurial make-up.) A pivotal point in the defense will be Sirhan's fall from a horse while he was working as an exercise boy in 1966. His lawyers will argue

~~that he suffered head injuries—and that~~
he was never the same after the ~~tumble~~.
Even before the fall, Sirhan was a flighty, sensitive youth, given to fits of temper and bursts of political polemic. His parents were dirt-poor Jordanian Christians, his father a tempestuous man who believed in frequent hidings for his sons. The family (Sirhan has four brothers and a sister who died in 1967) migrated to Pasadena with church and UNRRA help in 1957 but soon came apart. Sirhan managed to get through a few months of junior college, where he studied history and Russian and dreamed of being a journalist, diplomat or teacher. But he suddenly dropped out and went to work, first as a stable groom at Santa Anita, later as an exercise boy at the Granja Vista del Rio horse ranch at Corona.

And then came the fall. Afterward, Sirhan complained of backaches, headaches, blurry vision. He quit the ranch, holed up for nearly a year in his room and read Middle Eastern history and occult books till his mother—desperate to get him out of the house—lined up a job for him as a delivery clerk at an organic food store. Sirhan's nationalism, always hot, waxed hotter. Though he was a preschool toddler at the time of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, he told vivid atrocity tales, insisting he had once seen Israeli soldiers cut off an Arab woman's breasts. Sirhan's boss, John Henry Weidner, a Dutch immigrant who had been active in the World War II resistance, argued for forgiveness—as he himself had forgiven the Germans. "I would like to be like you but I cannot," Sirhan replied. "Ask the Lord to come to your help," Weidner urged. But Sirhan bitterly shot back, "There is no God, because you see what happened to the Arabs."

Rendezvous: What happened to Sirhan is a matter of rich record. He and Weidner quarreled early last year, and Sirhan left. Weidner says he quit; Sirhan insisted he was fired and, in a last tantrum, staged a brief sit-in atop a wrapping table. Shortly thereafter Sirhan Bishara Sirhan—the name is Arabic for "Wanderer Good-News Wanderer"—and Robert Francis Kennedy kept their rendezvous at the Ambassador.

And now, at last, after three postponements, Sirhan was due to stand trial. It will be a long affair; Judge Herbert Walker, 69, an even-handed Earl Warren appointee who has run more than 100 murder trials, hopes to hold this one to two months, but the defense and prosecution alike expect it to run at least three. Awaiting it all in his windowless, thirteenth-floor cell in the Hall of Justice, Sirhan has lately begun picking at his food, letting his newspapers go unread and pacing constantly in his 12-foot-long exercise corridor. Only as his trial drew near did he betray battle nerves, and no one knew which prospect caused him more anxiety: that he would be punished for what he had done—or that he would somehow miss his only chance to tell the world why he did it. L.U.