

Sirhan Change of Plea Seen Likely

Admission of Guilt May Shorten Trial and Bring Life Sentence

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Sirhan Bishara Sirhan probably will plead guilty to first-degree murder in the slaying of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy, it was learned Tuesday.

The switch from an earlier plea of innocence could come when the trial reconvenes Thursday morning, and would result from either an understanding or a firm belief that a life term would be the maximum penalty.

Such a change of plea would make it unnecessary to try Sirhan on the question of guilt or innocence and would reduce the trial—once expected to consume two or three months—to a penalty hearing, possibly of only a few days' duration.

The only likely obstacle would be Sirhan's own refusal to change his plea.

Defense attorneys huddled Tuesday afternoon with Sirhan, his mother, Mary, and brother, Munir, to discuss the possible advantages of a guilty plea.

Sirhan has been described as fearful that a change of plea could rob him of the chance to publicly air his reasons for the assassination.

Reason for Switch Told

The willingness of the three defense lawyers to change the plea is said to be based on their conviction that, while psychiatric evidence would not warrant a death penalty, they could not hope for a jury verdict of less than first-degree murder.

They are confident that the psychiatric evidence by both sides would block any effort to secure a death penalty. Instead, they feel, it tends to support the defense contention that Sirhan's diminished mental or emotional capacity mitigated the degree of premeditation that must be proved to warrant a death penalty.

They are so confident that they

consented about two weeks ago to allow the prosecution's psychiatric consultant, Dr. Seymour Pollack, to examine Sirhan.

It was believed that the prosecution, after considering Pollack's findings, substantially agreed with the defense assessment.

It was also believed that Superior Judge Herbert V. Walker is inclined to accept the change of plea, with the understanding that the matter would proceed immediately to some form of penalty trial before a jury.

Under California law, whether a person pleads guilty to first-degree murder or is convicted of it, the only two possible sentences are death or life imprisonment.

Younger Makes First Visit

Speculation on a possible guilty plea has been rife since the plea of innocence was first entered last year. Matters came to a head Monday morning, however, when Dist. Atty. Evelle J. Younger made his first visit to the trial.

After a half-hour session between prosecution and defense counsel in Judge Walker's chambers, both sides were uncommunicative about the reason for the meeting.

It was learned, however, that a possible change of plea was discussed.

Then Younger himself, in a television interview Monday night, gave added impetus to the speculation when he commented cryptically that the Sirhan trial could take "three months or three days."

A change of plea is one of the few things that could reduce the trial so drastically after forecasts of months of testimony and nearly six weeks already consumed with preliminary motions and selection of 12 regular and six alternate jurors.

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Younger and Chief Dep. Dist. Atty. Lynn D. Comp-ton enlivened the speculation still further Tuesday when they said the prosecution would not be willing to accept a guilty plea to either manslaughter or second-degree murder. They did specify that they would have to consider a plea of guilty to first-degree murder.

The defense has indicated for some time, it was learned, that it might consider a change of plea.

Younger's Stand

Younger is believed to have taken the position, however, that before accepting a plea of guilty he should have the full benefit of the results of the police investigation and of Dr. Pollack's evaluation of Sirhan.

Soon after Dr. Pollack first interviewed the defendant, Younger informed persons close to the Kennedy family that the acceptance of a change in plea was being discussed, and the information was received noncommittally.

Younger himself revealed Tuesday that he had offered the Nixon Administration an opportunity "to make any comments concerning the disposition of the case" in so far as it may have international implications.

Got No Comment

"I made it convenient," he said, "for appropriate officials in government to express an opinion to me—they declined and made no comment or recommendation."

The regular jury was sworn in two weeks ago, and six alternates were sworn in Tuesday morning, after questioning that was remarkably cursory in contrast to earlier, methodical testing by both sides of each prospective juror's religious, political and social views.

It was noteworthy, also, that the prosecution made

no mention this week to prospective jurors of the possibility they might be asked to vote a death penalty.

The last alternate accepted before the alter-

Miss Gloria J. Haffey, was questioned briefly in chambers and not at all in open court. She was the only juror, among more than 100 prospects, to be accepted in such a manner.

Adds Speculation

This remarkably rapid and uncritical acceptance further deepened speculation that both defense and prosecution were eager to dispense finally with the time-consuming jury selection process and proceed.

Judge Walker, meanwhile, after swearing in the alternate panel, released all 18 jurors until 8 p.m. today, when they are to report to the Biltmore to be sequestered for however long the Sirhan trial will now last.

Dep. Dist. Atty. David N. Pitts accepted Miss Haffey on behalf of the prosecution and announced that the prosecution would accept the alternate panel.

Defense attorney Grant B. Cooper, asked whether the defense wanted to exercise another peremptory challenge, said "Your Honor, I'm happy to announce we have a jury."

In addition to Miss Haffey, the alternate panel included George Stitzel, a Los Angeles Times press-room foreman; Miss Ruth A. Stillman, an insurance adjuster for Firemen's Insurance; John H. Johnson, a computer designer for Scientific Data Systems; Clarence Yaw, a purchaser for Standard Oil of California, and Mrs. Eleanor B. Landgreen, a Temple City housewife, mother of three sons.

Johnson is the only Negro among the alternates and the 12 regular jurors sworn in earlier.

Mrs. Landgreen is the only sworn juror to come close to opposing capital punishment. She admitted under questioning that she could impose the

death penalty "only in the most extreme cases."

The defendant's mother, Mary, 55, told reporters afterward, "They seem like nice people. I must pray for them and may God give them the light."

Defense attorney Emile Zola Berman said of his planned opening statement for the defense: "We're going to work in all the problems that make up Sirhan Sirhan and explain how he ticks or doesn't tick."

Noting that the trial would be recessed for Lincoln's birthday, Judge

Walker adjourned proceedings until 9:30 a.m. Thursday and told the jurors "enjoy the holiday and take care of yourselves."

The judge told the jurors that facilities for confession and Mass would be provided for Catholic jurors and that an Episcopal priest will provide liturgical services for Protestants.