



SLAYING WITNESS—Juan Romero, left is directed by an official to courtroom where Sirhan B. Sirhan is on trial. Romero told the court about kneeling beside Sen. Robert F. Kennedy after the shooting.

Times photo by Steve Pontanini

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Sirhan Protests as His Attorney Decribes Him as Mentally Ill

Defendant Rises From Chair During Berman's Statement in Which He Is Pictured as Victim of Spells and Trances

BY DAVE SMITH

Times Staff Writer

Sirhan Bishara Sirhan rose from his chair to protest the opening statement of his own defense counsel Friday, as attorney Emile Zola Berman described him as an "immature, emotionally disturbed and mentally ill youth."

Sirhan's brief outburst was triggered by the second paragraph of Berman's brief statement to the jury during the youth's trial for the murder of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy.

Sirhan, 24, showed signs of obvious agitation, murmured "No, no," as Berman said he was mentally ill,

and began to rise from his chair.

Superior Court Inspector William Conroy leaned over the chair of defense investigator Michael McCowan and warned him quickly: "Talk to him, Mike."

McCowan leaned over, pushed Sirhan back into his chair with both hands and lectured him in whispers for several minutes as Berman continued to paint a picture of Sirhan as a victim of spells, trances and mystic delusions.

Defense attorney Russell E. Par-

sons told reporters later that Sirhan, "like most mentally ill people, doesn't like to be told he's mentally ill. He doesn't like it when I tell him."

The defendant's mother, Mary, 55, sat through the description of her second-youngest of five sons with head bowed, in silent depression.

A prosecution witness later testified that the slaying of Sen. Kennedy occurred because of a last-minute decision to walk down a different corridor.

It was during the testimony of Karl Uecker, assistant maitre d'hotel at the Ambassador, that the accidental element in the Kennedy assassination was outlined.

Uecker, 36, told the jury that he was leading Sen. Kennedy by the right hand from a victory celebration in the Embassy Ballroom to another party on the floor below, when an unidentified Kennedy aide told him:

"No, we're not going to go there. We're going to the press room."

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"It was a last-minute decision," Uecker said, but he obeyed and led Sen. Kennedy into a kitchen corridor that was a short cut to the nearby Colonial Room, where newspaper reporters awaited Sen. Kennedy's victory statement in the June 4 presidential primary.

In that corridor, surprised kitchen employes surrounded the jubilant Sen. Kennedy. "The senator was very happy," said Uecker, and stopped to shake hands with two busboys. Uecker took Sen. Kennedy's hand again and said, "Senator, let's go now."

Then, Uecker testified, someone brushed past him quickly as he looked another way, and Uecker heard "something like a firecracker," followed by another and another.

Fired Inch Away

The first "firecracker," the prosecution told the jury Thursday in its opening statement, was a bullet fired from one inch from Sen. Kennedy's head, and is believed to have been the shot that resulted in his death 25 hours later.

Uecker's testimony found little question from the defense table. In his opening statement Berman reiterated what the defense has admitted all along: Sirhan killed Sen. Kennedy.

"There is no doubt," Berman said, "and we have told you this from the beginning, that he did in fact fire the shot that killed Sen. Kennedy."

Tells of Admiration

But Sirhan "himself will tell you he admired and loved" Sen. Kennedy, Berman said, and killed the senator when "he was out of contact with reality, in a trance in which he had no voluntary control over his will, his judgment, his feelings or his actions."

"The killing," Berman said, "was unplanned and undeliberate; impulsive and without premeditation or malice, totally a product of a sick, obsessed mind and personality."

Berman outlined a story of wartime atrocity and childhood emotional disturbance in Sirhan's first

12 years in his native Palestine, saying that it was at the sight of violence in the Israeli-Arab conflicts, and exposure to danger and flight from bombs that Sirhan began to experience spells or trances.

He said psychiatrists and sociologists would support defense evidence that these experiences left Sirhan with obsessions and fantasies that deepened seriously after the family immigrated here in 1957, finally leaving him so mentally deteriorated that he was incapable of premeditated murder.

Sirhan's life after he was 12, Berman said, was a series of defeats, from grade school through high school and into Pasadena City College, where he studied to become a diplomat but was dismissed for failing grades.

After getting a job as an exercise boy at a thoroughbred ranch in hopes of becoming a jockey, Sirhan was thrown from a horse and knocked unconscious. He soon was complaining "of headaches, became more and more irritable, brooding, quick to anger and preoccupied with fanatical obsessions of hatred, suspicion and distrust," Berman said.

Discusses War

This culminated at one point, Berman said, in June, 1967, three days before the outbreak of the six-day Arab-Israeli war, when Sirhan wrote: "Declaration of war against American humanity," followed by: "The victims of the party in favor of this declaration will be or are not the President, Vice President, etc., down the ladder."

He also wrote, "The author of this memoranda expresses his wishes very bluntly that he wants to be recorded by history as the man who triggered off the last war."

Berman added: "From which I gather he meant the last war to ever be."

Berman said the progress of the Arab-Israeli war "triggered his spells. In his fantasies he was often a hero and savior of his people. In the realities of life, however, he was

small, helpless, isolated, confused and bewildered by emotions over which he had no control. He was unable to plan or think clearly, unable to maintain any meaningful direction to his life.

"He became concerned with mystical thoughts and searched for supernatural powers of the mind over matter. He started mystical experiments in his room. For example, he would concentrate on a hanging lead fishing sinker and make it swing back and forth by the power of his mind. He would concentrate on a candle flame and make it dance, first to the right and then to the left . . ."

Berman said Sen. Kennedy's campaign statements in May and June of 1968 advocating U.S. military aid to Israel were a "heavy shock" to Sirhan, who "admired and loved" Sen. Kennedy.

To Support Contention

"That did it!" Berman said. "Back to mysticism. According to methods he

read in a book he acquired, he concentrated in front of a mirror in his own room and thought and thought about Sen. Kennedy until at last, he saw his own face no longer, but that of Sen. Kennedy himself in the mirror."

Berman said psychiatrists and psychologists and tests including hypnosis would support the defense contention, and "Sirhan will tell you himself from the witness stand that he never thought he would ever kill Kennedy."

Berman told the jury that Sirhan's mental deterioration was the end product of a process that started at the age of 3, "when war broke out between Palestinian Arabs and Zionists in Palestine in 1947. It was then that shooting took place on the very street where he lived in Jerusalem . . . One night the building he lived in became a machine gun nest. On another night, his very home was bombed."

"On the Saturday before Easter of 1947, Sirhan and his mother, father, brothers and sister (now dead) crawled out of their home in the early dawn with gunshots all about them to a temporary safety in an Orthodox church convent in another part of the city.

"They never went back."

They lived with other uprooted Arabs in a hungry, war-torn violent existence . . ."

Sirhan, Berman said, "saw a little girl's leg blown off by a bomb and the blood spurting off from below her knee, as though from a faucet. He went into a spell, he stiffened, his face contorted, he was out of contact with reality, and lost all sense of where he was or what was happening around him."

Touches on Separation

Similar spells, including a trancelike spell lasting four days, came on Sirhan frequently as he witnessed war violence, Berman said, including once when a bomb exploded when Sirhan was near the Damascus Gate and another time when a bomb explosion outside the Sirhan flat tore a man's body apart.

Berman also touched on the separation between Sirhan's father, Bishara, and mother in 1957, seven months after the family left Palestine. "The father left their home alone, and abandoned his family and returned to Jordan," Berman said, "doing nothing for them financially or otherwise, up to and including the present—and in fact divorced his mother."

'Consult Conscience'

Berman concluded by asking the jury to "listen to the evidence, to adopt what science has to offer and to consult your conscience. In short, let true justice be done."

Besides Uecker, the prosecution called two former employes of the Ambassador to describe what they saw in the narrow hallway where Sen. Kennedy was shot.

Edward Minasian, formerly an assistant maitre d'hotel who was also helping lead Sen. Kennedy to the Colonial Room, said he believed Sen. Kennedy saw the gun that took his life.

"I believe he raised his

hand to try to protect himself," Minasian testified, "because I'm sure he saw the revolver, the same as I did."

Former busboy Juan Romero caused a hush to fall over the courtroom as he described kneeling beside the stricken senator and placing a rosary in the dying hand.

"That was just before Mrs. (Ethel) Kennedy pushed me away," Romero said. "I was touching his ear . . . and I felt blood dripping on my fingers . . . There was a rosary. It was from a priest or some person, and I put it in his hand."

Questioned Closely

Defense counsel questioned all three Ambassador employes closely on the placement of large wall mirrors outside the Embassy Ballroom, where Sirhan is said to have loitered for much of the evening.

The purpose of these questions was not specified, but they seemed to indicate the defense might attempt to show that Sirhan was in a state of self-induced hypnosis at the time of the slaying.

The questions recalled Berman's earlier statements about Sirhan's dabbling with mystic experiments with fishing sinkers, candles and mirrors, his "spells" and "trances" and hypnosis performed on him since the assassination by defense psychiatrists.