

TRIAL

2-16-69 C. B. J. [unclear]

The Kennedy Tragedy Relived

The tragic events of last June 5, when Sen. Robert F. Kennedy was murdered at an Ambassador post-election party, were brought to vivid life as his alleged assassin went on trial for his life.

Smoke hung heavy in the room and cheers filled the air, the hotel's assistant maitre d' told a Los Angeles Superior Court jury, when he took Kennedy by the hand to lead him away after the presidential candidate had delivered a ringing victory address. Instead of heading for another party on the floor below, Karl Uecker quoted an unidentified Kennedy aide as telling him, "we're going to the press room."

To the jury, Uecker explained it was a last-minute decision but he obeyed and led Kennedy into a kitchen corridor that was a shortcut to where reporters were waiting for an interview.

"I felt something moving in between a steam table and my stomach," he said in his German accent. "The next thing . . . I heard something like a firecracker. I heard another shot. Mr. Kennedy was falling out of my hand . . . the man kept on shooting . . ."

Asked if he saw the man in the courtroom, Uecker stood up and dramatically pointed.

"Right over there," he said, and

tousle-haired Sirhan B. Sirhan, a 24-year-old Jordanian Arab, smiled weakly.

The long-delayed trial finally got under way after Superior Judge Herbert V. Walker denied a motion for mistrial, made by Sirhan's attorneys on the basis of a story in The Times that speculated the defendant would change his plea from innocent to guilty of first-degree murder.

And it began on a note of disagreement between Sirhan and his own defense counsel, New York Atty. Emile Zola Berman. In his opening statement, Berman described his client as an "immature, emotionally disturbed and mentally ill youth," and said that the slaying of Kennedy was the product of a "sick, obsessed mind and personality."

Sirhan murmured "No, no," and started to rise from his chair. As court attaches restrained him, another defense attorney told reporters:

"Like most mentally ill people, he doesn't like to be told he's mentally ill . . ."

Sirhan is not pleading legal insanity. He is relying on California's precedent of diminished responsibility, under which a defendant can be legally sane but still not responsible for his actions. *ord*