

Sirhan: Prison Problem if He Is Convicted?

Security Measures in State Institutions Held OK in Accused Slayer's Case

2-17-69 E/A
BY DAVID LARSEN

Times Staff Writer

In a prison, the most common method of murder is with a home-made shiv—quite often a steel bed-slat which has been sharpened on a cell floor.

The victim is usually an anonymous convict and the crime usually receives little outside attention. It happened 14 times in the prisons of the state last year.

Suppose an internationally known convict showed up who had murdered a presidential candidate. Wouldn't he be an exceptional target?

To be specific about it, if the defense of Sirhan E. Sirhan prevails and the accused assassin of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy is sentenced to a life of incarceration, how can he possibly be kept from harm?

Disclose Previous Steps

State prison officials were reluctant Sunday to speculate on Sirhan's future as such, but they did disclose the steps which have been taken regarding other convicts whose backgrounds or personalities indicate the advisability of providing them with protection.

"Protection cases aren't uncommon," said Philip Guthrie, information officer for the Department of Corrections. "They include informers, inmates who we think might be targets of the aggressive homosexuals, and former law enforcement officers."

For instance, Jack Kirschke, the former Los Angeles County deputy district attorney who was convicted of murdering his wife and her boyfriend, is considered a special case.

Kirschke couldn't be thrown in with other men whose plight is due to his work as a prosecutor. For this reason, he has been assigned per-

manently to clerical duties at the reception center of the California Institution for Men at Chino. He lives with other inmates, felt to be of stable natures.

Would Be First Stop

That reception center, incidentally, would be Sirhan's first stop, if he is sentenced to life imprisonment.

Any criminal sentenced in one of the 11 southern counties of the state is sent first to Chino (the rest go to a reception center at Vacaville).

The typical stay is six weeks. During that time the convict is given aptitude tests, psychiatric tests (if they are indicated) and a history of his life is compiled.

With this and other information in hand—such as how much of a security risk the inmate is likely to be—the reception center staff forwards to the director of corrections a recommendation of which facility he should be assigned to. The director usually goes along with the recommendations.

There are 11 prisons for men in California. They are at Folsom and San Quentin (both maximum security), at Chino (separate from the reception center and considered minimum security), at Susanville, Jamestown and Chino (conservation centers considered minimum security) and at Tehachapi, Vacaville, San Luis Obispo, Soledad and Tracy (ranging in security from medium to minimum).

Theoretically, Sirhan could be sent to any of the 11. Because of the nature of his crime, however, the minimum security facilities are regarded by Department of Corrections officials as unlikely.

At a minimum security penitentiary, there are no armed guards and the housing is in dormitories. Murderers are very seldom assigned to one from the reception center.

Although Vacaville is the state's mental hospital-prison, it is by no means automatic that Sirhan would go there.

"We figure we've got about 3,400 people who should be on some kind of psychiatric program," said Guthrie. "But Vacaville accommodates only 1,400 — and it is filled."

Guthrie said no special preparations have been made anywhere for Sirhan, although he said there have been discussions about how he might be handled at the reception center.

In addition to Folsom and San Quentin, the medium security prisons have maximum security arrangements within

them.

"For example, we have limited access units where a man's movements are closely controlled," said Guthrie.

The most stringent kind of protection for a prisoner would be to put him in that type of unit and, in effect, keep him under almost round-the-clock lockup, even feeding him in his cell.

Of the 28,600 persons now doing time in state prisons, not many get this kind of treatment. Those who do are usually criminals considered too dangerous to be allowed to circulate with others.

No Choice

"We don't like to do that to a guy," said Guthrie. "But sometimes there's no choice."

Although no prison officials would say as much, this is the type of treatment regarded as likely for Sirhan—at least in the beginning.

Not so much because he might present a danger to others, but because officials will probably want to evaluate his attitude as an inmate and also to get a line through the grapevine on how the other prisoners feel about him.

"Time solves a lot of problems," said one prison official. "Mind you, I'm not referring specifically to Sirhan, but interest in a well-publicized individual can subside in a prison, just as it does on the outside."

"It isn't uncommon for a protection case to be eventually allowed into a regular institution routine."

Select Group

A transition for Sirhan might be from constant lockup to a special assignment which would put him in contact with only a select group of inmates and under supervision of staff members only.

For example, he might be made a janitor in a prison hospital—but in an area which would keep him from contact with the general population of the institution.

Sirhan might even be

sent to the facility at Tracy, where there is a special unit consisting entirely of protection cases. Those men—about 20 of them—live together and go to their jobs together, always under an escort.

Los Angeles County has gone to considerable expense to insure the safety of Sirhan, but Guthrie said protection cases in state penitentiaries don't mean extra costs. "The staff and the surroundings are there anyway," he said. *for*