

'I Killed Robert F. Kennedy,' Sirhan Yells in Rage at Judge

Defendant Demands to Change Plea and Be Executed, to Fire Attorney, Represent Himself, but Court Refuses

LAT-3/7/69

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Sirhan Bishara Sirhan, infuriated at disclosure of his school grades and his IQ of 89, flew into a rage at his murder trial Friday, tried to fire his defense team and demanded he be permitted to change his plea to guilty and be executed.

In a firm but angry voice he said: "I killed Robert F. Kennedy willfully, premeditatedly and with 20 years of malice aforethought . . ."

Superior Judge Herbert V. Walker, obviously angered at the flareup, refused to accept the change of plea or the firing of the three-man defense team.

As Sirhan's 10-minute tirade verged on a shouting match with the veteran jurist, Judge Walker threatened the tiny defendant with a face mask to silence him and arm straps to keep him in his chair if there were further outbursts.

School Grades Disclosed

The temper tantrum appeared triggered by the methodical disclosure of Sirhan's grades in Pasadena's junior high and high schools. A school official confirmed that Sirhan was a "C" student and said his intelligence quotient tested out at 89—slightly below the 90-110 range considered average. At that point Sirhan began to blow up.

After a quick, whispered conference with the 24-year-old defendant, attorney Russell B. Parsons asked for a recess.

The jury was led out and defense attorney Grant B. Cooper, obviously taken aback, explained that Sirhan had earlier said he would forbid the calling of about a dozen witnesses. Cooper said Sirhan later had calmed down and had promised cooperation, but that he wanted to speak up in court.

There followed this dramatic exchange between Judge Walker and Sirhan:

Judge Walker: There is something you wanted to say?

Sirhan: May I address the court in chambers, sir?

Walker: No.

Sirhan: I at this time, sir, withdraw my original plea of not guilty and submit the plea of guilty as charged on all counts. I also request that my counsel disassociate themselves from this case completely.

Walker: Do I understand—stand up—do I understand that you want to plead guilty to murder in the first degree?

Sirhan: Yes, sir, I do.

Walker: All right, and what do you want to do about the penalty?

Sirhan: I will offer no defense whatsoever.

Walker: The question is, what do you want to do about the penalty?

Sirhan: I will ask to be executed, sir.

Walker: Now, I know of nothing in the law that permits a defendant under any circumstances to enter a plea of guilty to murder of the first

Please Turn to Page 2, Col. 1

Continued from First Page
degree and to ask for execution.

Sirhan: Well, I have, sir.

Walker: Well now, just a minute. why do you want to do this?

Sirhan: I believe, sir, that is my business, isn't it?

Walker: You just believe it is your business?

Sirhan: That is my prerogative.

Walker: No, it isn't. Now, when we come to accepting a plea, you have to give me a reason.

Sirhan: I killed Robert F. Kennedy willfully, premeditatedly, with 20 years of malice aforethought, that is why.

Walker: Well, the

evidence has to be produced here in court.

Sirhan: I withdraw all evidence, sir.

Walker: There is no such procedure.

Sirhan: To hell with it.

Plea Rejected

Walker: Well, the court will not accept the plea. Proceed with the trial. Let me give you to understand here and now that this court will not put up with any more of your interrupting. You are to follow the advice of the court and just sit down there. Any further interruptions by you in this trial will result in your being restrained. You understand that?

Sirhan: Sir?

Walker: I mean by that that you will have a face mask put on you—which will prohibit you from talking — and, further, your arms will be strapped to your chair and the trial will proceed. You understand that?

Sirhan: I understand. However, sir, I intend to defend myself pro per (defendant representing himself). I don't want to be represented by these counsel.

Walker: You have retained counsel. Counsel is staying in the trial.

Sirhan: What I have said, I don't want anyone to shove a trial down my throat, sir, and you are not going to shove it down my throat, sir, in any way you want.

Walker: You say you want to go pro per?

Sirhan: Yes, I will.

Judge's Position

Walker: What are the defenses, let me ask what are the elements of the crime of murder?

Sirhan: Sir, I don't know. I don't understand all of this legality. You let me—

Walker: I am conducting these proceedings, not you. What are the de-

fenses to murder in the first degree?

Sirhan: I don't know.

Walker: I find you are incapable of representing yourself. Sit down and keep quiet, and, if not, I intend to keep you quiet.

Sirhan: No, sir, I still maintain my original point. I plead guilty to murder and ask to be executed.

Walker: I thought I made it clear. The court will not accept the plea.

Sirhan: I am sorry. I will not accept it.

Walker: The law tells me what I can do and cannot do. Now, you understand from here on out you keep quiet, and if not, I will see to it that you are kept quiet.

Sirhan: I am sorry, but my original position stands.

Sirhan 'Insists'

Walker: Get the jury down.

Sirhan: Why not let me go into chambers? I insist.

Walker: You are not going to go in chambers. I let you go in there once and that was the beginning and the end. That procedure is over as far as I am concerned. We will proceed with the trial. Again, I will tell you to keep quiet and consult with your attorneys.

At this, Sirhan subsided and asked to talk with his defense team — Cooper, Parsons and Emile Zola Berman.

After a brief recess, and before jurors were brought back to the court, Cooper told Judge Walker that Sirhan was adamant and that "he has advised us definitely, positively and unequivocally that he does not desire us to continue to represent him."

Cooper then said the three-man defense team was "perfectly willing—as a matter of fact I might say anxious—to withdraw from the case and either let him represent himself or be represented by other counsel."

'Not Deserting Him'

Cooper added, however,

that they would be equally willing to proceed with their defense and that they did not want to appear to be deserting Sirhan, except upon his insistence.

Judge Walker denied the offer to withdraw, saying good cause for such withdrawal had not been shown and adding that Sirhan appeared clearly unable to represent himself.

Throughout the stormy hour the scene consumed, Mrs. Mary Sirhan, 55, sat in her third-row seat, alternately sobbing with her

hands covering her face or staring ahead, blinking rapidly as tears ran down her cheeks.

At Judge Walker's ruling that the trial would proceed, the jury was led in and Mrs. Sirhan was the next witness called.

Still blinking back tears, the tiny woman — not quite five feet tall — dressed in a black knit suit with gold embroidery, took the stand.

With a quavering voice, she said Sirhan was born March 19, 1944, in Jerusalem, where her family had lived "for hundreds of years . . . from generation to generation."

Mother Led Away

Jerusalem was called, she said, "the city of peace . . ." and with that her voice quavered into a sob.

Judge Walker quickly adjourned the trial as the sobbing Mrs. Sirhan was led from the courtroom. The jurist told spectators and newsmen:

"I can't conceive of a worse set of circumstances under which a mother could be called to testify. I think she shows great courage."

The emotional afternoon — by far the most dramatic of several outbursts by Sirhan this week — was preceded by what was for Sirhan an unusually sunny morning, as a childhood friend testified to Sirhan's twisted early years.

Ziad Hashimeh, 25 and only a month older than Sirhan, testified that:

When he was about 10 in Jerusalem, Sirhan went to the well one day for his mother. When he drew up the bucket, a severed human arm and hand floated in the water.

This and other childhood horrors used to send Sirhan into fits of shaking and trembling—the forerunners of the trance-like states the defense claims Sirhan was in when he killed Sen. Kennedy.