

LOOKS AND ACTS LIKE BOY

Sirhan Marks 25th Birthday of an Oddly Incomplete Life

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He is short, only 5-feet-4, pencil-thin at 110 pounds, and somehow always looks swaddled in a big brother's clothes. Nine months of confinement in a sunless cell have left him pale as a consumptive child.

He looks about 17. He acts even younger, putting one in mind of a shy boy accidentally set down in the midst of a board of directors' meeting.

Watching Sirhan Bishara Sirhan every day, it is sometimes difficult to remember he is a man, 25 years old today.

Time to Take Stock

To many people, a 25th birthday is a time to take stock on that first third of their lives which usually governs how the rest will go.

But to Sirhan, this milestone marks the virtual end of a life that was oddly incomplete, barely begun.

He enters the courtroom with a jaunty strut, smiles and waves at his mother, Mary, and brothers, Munir and Adel, and occasionally even nods a greeting to certain reporters whose stories he has read and been pleased with.

He is elaborately polite to every-

one in the courtroom, chopping up his sentences with a respectful "sir" at every phrase, so that he is sometimes difficult to follow as he threads his delicate, courteous way through testimony on how he shot Sen. Robert F. Kennedy in the head at point-blank range but can't remember doing it.

For hours at a time he can appear totally unaffected by what is being said, smiling at mention of a possible death sentence, pouncing with small triumph on minor courtroom errors and seeming not to hear some of the most damaging testimony. He shows concern and sometimes even rage only when someone repeats the thesis that is his only salvation: that he is mentally ill, incapable of mature and meaningful premeditation to murder Kennedy.

He is on trial for his life, in what he reportedly regards as a purely political assassination, an act of patriotism to the Palestinian Arab cause, justified by maltreatment of Arab refugees like himself.

Resists Psychotic Brand

All the psychiatric evidence for both sides agrees that Sirhan doesn't want to be portrayed as a psychotic, but as a man with a mission.

Sirhan's view of his motive is thus a heroic one, and he is said to be gratified that many Palestinian refugees regard him as a national hero and eloquent exponent of their long-standing grievance against Zionism.

What is striking about Sirhan's view is its utter irrelevance to the quiet Pasadena existence he has known for half of his life.

In some twisted way that perhaps only psychiatry may ever explain, Sirhan walked the quiet, shaded streets of Pasadena and grew to a meek, polite adulthood with bloody scenes of Arab-Israeli conflict raging before his mind's eye.

Born in war-ravaged Jerusalem in 1944 and brought to Pasadena in early 1958, Sirhan evidently was so deeply branded with hatred of Zionists and fantasies of revenge that despite the move to Pasadena,

in a mental and emotional sense Sirhan really never left Jerusalem at all.

He never became an American citizen, and from the witness stand he has proudly proclaimed himself a Palestinian Arab. He also cited an Arab proverb, "A friend of my enemy is my enemy," as explanation

Please Turn to Back Page, Col. 1

Continued from First Page

of why Sen. Kennedy, a friend of Israel, had to die. But, he has said repeatedly, he doesn't remember killing him.

Inability to remember is the keystone of Sirhan's defense theory of diminished capacity to premeditate. His attorneys claim the diminutive Arab was in a trance when he killed Kennedy, suffering a dissociative reaction to which paranoid schizophrenics are prone, abetted by degrees of drunkenness, self-induced hypnosis, long-term rage at Zionism and short-term rage at Kennedy's support of Israel.

Prosecution View

The prosecution counters that Sirhan's alleged trance is part retrograde amnesia and part convenience.

Whether amnesia is feigned or genuine part of Sirhan's mental illness remains to be proved. But the uncontested evidence of his illness—from his childhood in Jerusalem to his own chaotic scribbles in his college notebook—testify to both a life of flight down blind alleys and to an iron pride that could not or would not seek a way out.

Sirhan and others of his family have described the terrors of war in Jerusalem before the state of Israel was created in 1948, causing the family to lose their home and live in poverty for eight years. A tone of real persecution rings clearly in their every description of those years.

Devout Christians

Throughout this upheav-

val of Sirhan's 11 1/2 years, the family was devoutly but variously Christian - attending the Greek Orthodox Church, sending the children to a Lutheran school and getting aid from a Baptist missionary couple who ultimately sponsored their immigration to the United States.

After visits to the Syrian Orthodox Cathedral and a Baptist church in Pasadena, where Sirhan is said to have frowned on other boys and girls for holding hands, the family gravitated to a Pasadena Presbyterian church, where Mrs. Sirhan found a job in the nursery school.

During her son's murder trial, Mrs. Sirhan has repeatedly affirmed her faith in God and said that only God has given her the strength to endure the ordeal.

She has endured war and poverty, has been abandoned by her husband, has buried eight of 13 children, and now, at 55, is undergoing misery worse than even she could have dreamed. Three of her five sons already had police records when a fourth killed Kennedy.

Could a different way of belonging to God have made a difference for them all? For Sirhan?

In a family described as generally aloof from their non-Christian neighbors in Jerusalem, Sirhan was bright, polite, devout, a model to whom other mothers pointed when their own sons did wrong. If he had been a less perfect son, less praised for his uprightness, would he perhaps have grown into a better man?

Today at 25, this perfect son is described by all six psychiatrists or clinical psychologists who examined him—both for the prosecution and the defense—as mentally ill.

Paranoia Signs

Among the signs of paranoia are the conviction of one's own rightness in an evil world and a sense

of being persecuted and hated, which is often a reversal of the hatred one feels in himself but is shameful and un-Christian to admit.

Whether Sirhan's childhood confidence in his relationship to God reinforced his notion of his own rightness and the world's evil may yet figure in psychiatric testimony.

What is clear already is that his relationship to God did nothing to mitigate his hatred of Zionism and the feelings of persecution he brought to Pasadena with him.

Sirhan's own statements, in his notebook and on the witness stand, unwittingly testify to how much he felt the world was against him, how people, even Kennedy, plotted behind his back.

On March 4 Sirhan testified, "I had loved Robert Kennedy, I cared for him very much, and I hoped that he would win the Presidency . . ."

But last May, he said, he saw a television documentary on Kennedy's career which showed Kennedy, then 22, in Israel in 1948, when Sirhan was 4. That was the first time he had known, Sirhan said, that Kennedy "was doing a lot of things behind my back that I didn't know about."

It was after that, Sirhan admitted, that he must have begun writing in his notebook that "Kennedy must die."

It is the notebook that gives the clearest picture of the bleakness of Sirhan's emotional life, in a rambling string of phrases and sentence fragments touching on his wish to improve himself, to be like other people, to be loved by two girls he barely knew—and to kill Kennedy, President Johnson, former United Nations Ambassador Arthur Goldberg, to overthrow the U.S. system of government and to be remem-

bered as the man who started World War III.

On June 2, 1967, at 12:30 p.m., Sirhan began writing this entry: "A Declaration of War Against American Humanity. When in the course of human events it has become necessary for me to equalize and seek revenge for all the inhuman treatments . . . committed against me by the American people the manifestation (sic) of this Declaration will be executed by its purport as soon as he is able to command a sum of money (\$2,000) and to acquire some firearms the specifications of which have not been established yet.

"The victims of the party in favor of this declaration will be or are now—the Pres., vice, etc.—down the ladder.

"The time will be chosen by the author at the convenience of the accused.

Although he is charged with first-degree murder, few believe he is in any real danger of going to the gas chamber—chiefly because all psychiatric evidence, for the prosecution as well as the defense, is substantially in agreement that Sirhan is mentally ill.

This agreement was the basis for the prosecution's willingness long ago to agree to a guilty plea and a life sentence, but Superior Judge Herbert V. Walker rejected the plea change, ruling that the Sirhan case must have full public disclosure with a jury setting the penalty.

The person on whom the defense counts the most is Sirhan himself. His courtroom behavior, the defense believes, is the best evidence the jury will see of Sirhan's peculiar emotional half-life.