

After 17 Years, 'Ifs' Still Haunt Sirhan

Assassin of Robert F. Kennedy Up for His 7th Parole Hearing

By BILL FARR, Times Staff Writer

SOLELDAD, Calif.—Seventeen years have passed since Robert F. Kennedy was shot to death at the Ambassador Hotel, and Sirhan Sirhan says he still cannot remember pulling the trigger that night.

But he takes full blame for the assassination, denying there was a conspiracy and maintaining that he did not plan to kill the senator before their fateful and fatal crossing of paths in the hotel pantry.

Sirhan attributes his murderous act to "a pent-up political rage that unfortunately was fueled that evening by four Tom Collins drinks."

And while willing to be held fully accountable for what he did, Sirhan hopes that the state Board of Prison Terms "will be fair enough to give back the parole date" that was revoked three years ago.

On Wednesday, the parole board will conduct the seventh hearing on Sirhan's suitability for release from prison. His attorney, Luke McKisack, said, "All we are asking is that the parole board not go in with a preconceived notion about what their decision should be."

In a series of interviews over the last year, the most recent being on the 17th anniversary of the June 5, 1968, assassination, Sirhan also:

- Explained why he has not voiced remorse for the killing during his appearances before the

Board of Prison Terms, saying: "I have deep sorrow for what I did, but to put on an act for the parole board is not the way to show it."

- Complained that "the only reason" his scheduled 1984 parole date was canceled was "because (then-Los Angeles County Dist. Atty.) John Van de Kamp wanted to whip up a furor against me to help him become attorney general."

- Compared his case with that of Dan White, whom Sirhan described as a "killer of not just one but two popular politicians in San Francisco and who came here into this unit where I live at Soledad long after I was sentenced but already is out."

'Evening Fuzzy'

Recalling the assassination, Sirhan said: "That whole evening is fuzzy. I remember some things but I honestly have no recollection to this day of firing at Kennedy or shouting 'You son of a bitch' at him. That part is a total blank."

Sirhan, who is now 41, says his time in the Ambassador is "pretty much a blur." He remembers the dizzying effect of the hotel's mirrored hallways, compounded by the effect of the drinks he had consumed earlier in the evening. He says he initially went to the hotel "to get some coffee to help sober me up."

If he had no memory of the shooting, Sirhan was asked by a reporter, what was the last thing he remembers?

"This is a funny thing. What I remember, in my confused state, was a typewriter typing without anybody doing the typing. Now I know that I was in the press room and what I was looking at was a Teletype machine. There was a lady there who saw me and told police that I seemed to be in a trance. That report, by the way, couldn't be found at the time of my trial but I understand they found it later."

Sirhan said his first recollection after the shooting is of "being choked by someone. I thought I was going to be choked to death. Then I remember someone prying that person's hold off my throat. I think the person who did the prying that saved me was Roosevelt Grier. I thought I was going to die right there."

Sirhan talked about the many "ifs" that might have altered the tragic outcome of that evening. "I had planned to go to the races that day but because the track was closed, I ended up having the whole day free. If the horses had been running, I would not have ended up downtown at all."

When he learned the track was closed, he went to a private firing range and practiced

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WILLIAM G. LIGNANTE

Sirhan Sirhan

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shooting with the .22-caliber pistol that he had purchased months earlier.

He then went to the Wilshire area with some thoughts of disrupting or at least heckling at a parade scheduled to observe the anniversary of the Six Day War, which had ended in a devastating defeat for the Arabs as Israel captured the Sinai, the Golan Heights and East Jerusalem.

He insists that he did not even know that Kennedy was going to be at the Ambassador.

"They claim I was lying in wait. How could that be? I did not know what way he was coming out. In fact, only a last-minute decision by a Secret Service man prompted Kennedy to leave through the

kitchen. There is another 'if.' If the Secret Service man had not suddenly changed the route, our paths would not have crossed. Kennedy would not be dead and I would not be in prison."

Sirhan does not deny he had developed a "deep rage" toward Kennedy but he insists that did not generate a plan to kill the senator.

Admired Kennedy

"I originally had admired Sen. Kennedy. He was for the poor and downtrodden. He seemed to be for justice. But then he did things to support Israel, including backing the sending of 50 Phantom jets to Israel that I knew would be used to attack my people. It enraged me, I admit that."

There is one more key aspect of the case about which Sirhan claims to have no memory—the phrases he wrote over and over in a notebook: "RFK must be disposed of . . . Robert Fitzgerald Kennedy must soon die . . . My determination to eliminate RFK is becoming more of an unshakeable obsession."

He knows that the rambling entries in the notebook, found by investigators searching his room after the assassination, remain damning evidence against his claim that the shooting was a spontaneous, unplanned action.

"I just don't remember writing that stuff. Dr. (Bernard) Diamond (an expert witness for the defense) said at the trial that I did that after hypnotizing myself in the bathroom mirror. I don't know. I think it is at least possible that these lapses of memory could stem from a head injury I suffered in falling from a horse. Or somehow my mind may have just blocked these things out. After all this time, I could have come up with some explanation. But I am not going to lie about it. I just don't remember."

Rebutting the theory that the assassination was premeditated, Sirhan said:

"Listen, if I had planned it, do you think I would have done it face to face and make certain that I would get caught or killed on the spot? And would I have used a .22 instead of a more powerful gun? Nor would I have been practicing at a public gun range so everybody could identify me. None of that makes sense."

To those who believe Sirhan was part of a conspiracy and the advocates of a "second gun" theory, Sirhan says:

"If anybody else was involved, wouldn't I help myself after all these years, by telling authorities who else was in on it? The second

gun theory is interesting but it is implausible since I was not acting in concert with anyone else. The only one it could have been was a security guard next to Kennedy, who might have fired by mistake. Frankly, for a long time I had encouraged those putting forth the second gun theory. I would have liked somehow to find out that the fatal bullet had been fired by someone else. But it seems quite unlikely and besides, it would not erase what I did."

During his last two parole hearings, Sirhan has appeared tense and sometimes angry. He seemed preoccupied with his own plight and showed little concern about the horrendous ramifications of his crime.

"It may appear that I have no remorse. I have not made a great point of it to the parole board. A lot of inmates would go out there and put on an emotional show for the parole board. I don't think that is right.

"But I do have great sorrow for what I did, not only to Kennedy but to his wife and the many children he had. I see the troubles they have had as they grew up and it weighs on me about my possible responsibility for those things. That sorrow never really leaves me. But I have had to come to terms with it or I would be unable to go on."

Sirhan blames one man for causing him "the heartbreaking disappointment" of having his parole date, which was set in 1975, canceled in 1982. That man is John Van de Kamp, who initiated the revocation when he was Los Angeles County district attorney and preparing to run for state attorney general.

"Under the rules and regulations of the parole board, they gave me a parole date back in 1975, which meant I would get out in 1984. Then all of a sudden in 1982, Van de Kamp decides to ask the parole board to rescind my release date. I had been a model prisoner for those seven years. In fact, the only thing that happened in those seven years to change my status was that John Van de Kamp wanted to become attorney general."

However, Van de Kamp, both then and now, said he had planned to petition for blocking the parole "long before I decided to run for attorney general."

"Clearly, the granting of a release date to Sirhan was an error in the first place," Van de Kamp said, "because, as we proved, the board did not have all of the facts about

Sirhan's prison conduct and psychiatric evaluation before them when they voted to release him. Contrary to Sirhan's apparent belief, I was not singularly responsible for his date being taken away. The members of the parole board itself had to agree with our facts and legal argument."

Van de Kamp argued that the 1975 panel that granted the parole did not have in its file two threatening letters Sirhan had written while in prison. One was sent to his trial attorney, Grant Cooper, in 1971 and the other to San Quentin prison official Vern Smith in 1975.

Taking note of those letters and other more recent verbal threats that Sirhan reportedly had made to prison staff members, the Board of Prison Terms on May 22, 1982, canceled his parole date on the ground he had demonstrated "a pattern of threatening behavior."

In the recent interviews with

The Times, Sirhan argued it is wrong for him to be held in prison longer "just because the man I shot was a senator running for President." He pointed out that there was no such extra penalty on the books for murdering a public official. (Since then the law has been changed to increase the punishment for killing some officeholders but the new law cannot apply to Sirhan.)

Van de Kamp counters Sirhan's statement by saying: "While the life of Kennedy or any senator is not individually of greater value than any other citizen, there was more at stake here. To invalidate the votes of a million people with the pull of a trigger tears at the very fabric of democracy."

Party Favorite

Kennedy had just won the California Democratic primary, putting him in the favorite's role to become his party's presidential candidate.

When those who want to keep Sirhan in prison pose arguments about paying an extra penalty for killing a public official, Sirhan compares his situation with that of Dan White, who served only five years for killing San Francisco Mayor George Moscone and Supervisor Harvey Milk.

Sirhan grants the legal distinction between the two cases is that a jury found White guilty only of voluntary manslaughter while Sirhan was convicted of first-degree murder, but says:

"First of all, the manslaughter verdict against White was incredible. He executed those people. If he had a valid diminished capacity defense because he was eating too many Twinkies, I sure had a better one because of too many Tom Collins plus the deep feelings about my homeland that affected my conduct."

White served most of his time in the same facility that has been Sirhan's home for the last 10 years, Protective Housing Unit No. 1 (PHU-1) at the state men's prison in Soledad, which lies in the middle of a truck farming area just inland from Monterey.

Sirhan has an almost absolute rule about not discussing other inmates because he feels he has been harmed by what others have said about him.

But he did relate an anecdote about himself, White and a third inmate that occurred while they were waiting in line to eat.

"This happened on the day that we heard on the radio about the verdict in the John Hinckley case. A guy who had been given a long, long sentence for several rapes was behind me saying, 'Only in America could a guy like Hinckley be absolved of guilt for trying to assassinate the President, and only here could I get a much longer sentence for rape than that guy got for murder,' pointing to White. White whirled around and shouted back, 'I am not a murderer. I was convicted of manslaughter.'"

Sirhan says he realizes that the White case was "sort of a fluke" but emphasized that he just wants to be treated fairly by the parole system—"no better and no worse than others in the system."

"There are guys who have committed multiple murders and guys who have hacked people up or tortured them to death who have gotten shorter sentences. That is not fair to me. That is all I am asking for, fairness. There should be some equity to the system."