

The Intricate Puzzle of Sirhan Sirhan

Post 6-9-68
London Sunday Times

Whatever happens when case No. A233421, the people of the State of California vs. Sirhan Bishara Sirhan, comes for trial, the authorities are determined that it will have nothing in common with what happened in Dallas 4½ years ago.

The indictment against Sirhan is all the more shattering for its formality: That he did murder "Robert Francis Kennedy, a human being," and attempt to murder the five other victims in that hotel kitchen. "This," said the District Attorney, a quiet-mannered, unobtrusive man named Evelle Younger, "is a very special case."

But is Sirhan a very special person? Was it private anguish that moved him; and, if so, what fed his hatred? Or is he, once again, linked with the numberless groups of extremists and fanatics in America or the Middle East?

Since the news reached Israel at 8:30 p.m. on Wednesday that Sen. Kennedy's suspected assassin was Jerusalem-born, the Israeli Secret Service has been trying to discover if any fanatical Arab underground movement was behind the killing. So far, agents have drawn a complete blank.

Their main lead was Sirhan's father, Bishara Salameh Sirhan, who lives in a modest home at the village of Taibeh, near Jerusalem. When the father opened up, he was asked first to identify himself and then to answer questions on his family and particularly his son Sirhan.

"Why are you asking me about my son?" he asked.

"You've heard the news about Senator Kennedy?"

"Yes."

"Well, the man who is ac-

See SUSPECT, A4, Col. 1

SUSPECT, From A1

cused of shooting him is your son Sirhan."

Mr. Sirhan collapsed. "He is such a good boy; he was always a good boy, all his teachers praised him," he kept on repeating when he recovered.

It is true. The family has an unblemished record. The father was, he proudly tells everyone, a "chief inspector" in the old British Public Works Department in Jerusalem. He was, in fact, a senior mechanic. Under both the Jordan administration and for the past year under Israeli rule, the family has had "no trouble, no blacklisting for anything, no political or extreme views, completely harmless," according to a security source.

The security checkup then turned to possible associates in Israeli-controlled territories. Here again a blank was drawn. The name Sirhan simply does not appear on any blacklist.

There have been reports of the existence of an ultra-secret and fanatical Arab murder gang—modelled on the old Jewish "Stern Gang"—with cells abroad, particularly among extremist Arab students. This hypothetical organization apparently aims to exterminate foreign politicians friendly with Israel.

No Evidence Found

But there is no evidence for this, and a high-ranking Israeli security source responsible for uncovering Arab underground activities

anywhere in the world said simply: "We would have known of it, but we don't."

Straightforward political conspiracy organized from the Middle East seems unlikely then. So authorities have delved back into the family's past, seeking some sort of clue to the inner turmoil of Sirhan. What emerges is a portrait that in

many respects fits the historical image of the lone, unbalanced assassin.

Sirhan's parents married about 1945, while the father was working for the British in the old mandate of Palestine. Sirhan is the fourth of five brothers and there is a sister. After the Arab-Israeli war of 1948 the family found a cheap flat in a Jew-

ish quarter in the walled Old City of Jerusalem, part of which had become the Jordanian sector. One of Sirhan's teachers once visited the flat and found it "very poor indeed."

Parents Religious

Both parents were very religious; the mother more intense. The father—a small, round-shouldered man with a high-pitched, slightly whining voice — is said to have been strict with his children. Friends say he gave them very little pocket money. He had very little to give: He was out of work for long periods.

The parents were Christians — Greek Orthodox — but they sent Sirhan to the Lutheran school in the Old City. It was near their flat. A teacher who remembers Sirhan, Salim Awad, now the headmaster, produced records showing that at least until he left for America at the age of 12 the boy was of above-average ability.

His report for 1955-56, his last year at the school, reads: "Religion very good; Arabic very good; English, good; arithmetic, very satisfactory; geometry (a new subject), good; history, satisfactory; geography, satisfactory; science, good; natural history (a new subject), satisfactory; drawing, satisfactory; singing, good; conduct, good; diligence, good; cleanliness, good; general comment, satisfactory."

Sirhan never succeeded in getting to the top of his

class: When he left he was seventh out of 16. Yet he was convinced of his own brilliance.

His father recalls the boy coming home, puffed with pride, after his teachers had praised him. "Papa, my teachers say I'm going to be a great man," the father quotes him as saying. Or "Tell me, Papa, am I cleverer than my brothers?"

His father would reply that if all went well the boy would go to a university in England. "You should have seen him walking round the house after I said that—so happy, so big."

A psychologist might find in these early intimations



Special to The Washington Post

Bishara Salameh Sirhan, the father of Sirhan Sirhan, talks to reporters.

of greatness, followed by the crushing life of a delivery boy for a Los Angeles food dealer, some hint of what drove him.

Admirer of Hitler

There was always a streak of latent fanaticism in Sirhan—specifically, a certain single-mindedness unusual in a child, a willingness to consider extension. He often said he admired Hitler. His father quotes him as saying more than once: "Hitler was a big man, a great man, and he had god ideas. In the end he was wrong only because his policies failed."

This does not make Sirhan a fascist, or even right-wing. Indeed, even at the age of 11 or 12 he was 'investigated' by the Jordanian Security Services on suspicion of left-wing leanings. Later, just before emigrating to America, he was "warned." And of course Sirhan was, naturally and vehemently, anti-Zionist, though—so far as they can be separated—not anti-Jewish. A 12-year-old's politics are hardly

immutable, but Sirhan's do point to a combination of precocity and determination.

Religion provided another, and perhaps more potent, strain of fanaticism. Sirhan was fonder of his mother than of his father and un-faithfully obedient to her. From her he learned his religion. It became steadily more obsessive, seemingly one of the props of his belief in his future greatness. **Lead Bible Nightly**

Sirhan always went straight home after school. Every evening he would read the Bible—his favorite reading—then kneel by his bed for long prayers. Then he would kiss the hands of his father and mother before going to bed. On Sundays, going to church, he would stand in front of mirror, carefully smoothing his cheap clothes.

He made friends easily. Yet sometimes Sirhan would

See SUSPECT, A5, Col. 1

take a strong dislike to another child—and usually it was for using foul language.

It was religion that finally split the family. And here the mystery about one possibly vital aspect of Sirhan's life begins.

Around 1956, Sirhan's parents started to break up. The Mukhtar (head man) of Taibeh says the split began when the mother became strongly drawn to the Jehovah's Witnesses. A version of events, given by people who know the family, is that after the breakup, the sect helped the mother to go to America in 1957 with Sirhan, two of his brothers and his sister.

The father apparently started divorce proceedings through a Greek Orthodox court, but stopped them some months later and decided to join his family in America. Other friends claim that the passage, also, was assisted by the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Sect Banned in Jordan

The father's present relationship with the sect is unclear. The Jehovah's Witnesses have been banned in Jordan for nine years, but they still proselytise fiercely. According to the Mukhtar of Taibeh, the father is supported by the sect—though why, is unknown.

According to Mukhtar Mu' add, it was money from the sect that helped the father build his new ten-room stone villa in Taibeh overlooking groves of almond and olive trees—a house that must have cost around \$12,000.

All this, the father denies. But on the table in his sitting room, he has a religious tract in Arabic, "Solving the International Crisis," and this is believed locally to be published by the Jehovah's Witnesses. And in his Bible he has marked in blue pencil a passage in Exodus, Chapter 3, which the Jehovah's Witnesses consider crucial. He says he did this so that, when talking to other villagers, he can quickly find the passage giving "God's real name, the name

he wants to be called by."

The fact that he gives some sort of religion instruction tends to confirm that he has been proselytising for the Jehovah's Witnesses, because there are few Moslems in the village to convert to Christianity: Nearly everyone is Greek Orthodox.

Background of Tension

So Sirhan comes from a background of tension, a home broken largely by disagreements over the doctrine of a somewhat fanatical sect. The Jehovah's Witnesses may not themselves be relevant; but the air of adamant and even intolerant righteousness inseparable from the sect probably is significant to understanding of Sirhan.

But America took the young Sirhan. From the backstreets of Jerusalem, he was hurled into the maelstrom of Los Angeles. What happened to him? What might have warped the bright, introspective, mother-dominated boy of 12?

Menninger's classic description of paranoia says:

"A feeling of being slighted . . . favors the secret nurturing of ideas of great power . . . Such an individual may come into conflict with the law, either as a direct actionist (e.g. murder) or a petitioner (law suits), a development which he regards as the natural outcome of his great but unrecognized importance, and of the envy and malice of an indifferent world . . . An impressive facade of reasonableness, earnestness and 'normality' may cloak this psychopathology to a disarming degree . . ."

In Police Files

The Pasadena police kept a "red flag file" on Sirhan. All it meant was that if he ever got into trouble, they had a file they could pull out which listed every contact he had with the law. We have seen the file, and all it proves is that Sirhan was a boy who was quarrelsome and had been on the edge of trouble a few times without really getting into hot water.

There are no criminal charges, only a dreary catalogue of trivial entries. Twice reported a bicycle stolen: once when he was fourteen and once when he was eighteen. Twice there

were complaints that he was causing a disturbance—the last time on March 7 this year, the day he was sacked from his last job. Once he lodged a complaint himself.

Pulled out at random, it could be the file of a million young men—or the dossier of a case of incipient paranoia.

Arrived in 1957.

Sirhan Bishara. Sirhan landed in New York on Jan. 12, 1957, with his mother, his sister Aida—who died of cancer last year—and three brothers: Sharif, Adel and

Munier (the fourth, Said Allah, arrived in 1960).

The father, who joined them a few months later, stayed in New York, where he found work as a plumber, and the mother took the children to California, where she got a job as a children's nurse.

But the father stayed in America for only three years, and lived with his family in Los Angeles for only a short part of that time. He says he came back to Jordan to look after his mother, aged as far as anyone can tell about 90, who had fallen ill but refused to go to America.

According to the Mukhtar, the parents' plans for a divorce were abandoned under the children's influence and they decided on separation. That was when the father returned, first to Jerusalem and later to Taibeh. Meanwhile, in Los Angeles, Mary Sirhan, the mother, settled her family. She rented a white wooden bungalow in the only racially mixed neighborhood in Pasadena, an aging suburb of Los Angeles.

A-Grades in High School.

Sirhan went to the John Muir High School, an excellent school, and did well. He had A-grades, he was on the student council for his last two years—he even joined the Officer Cadet Corps.

Then he went on to Pasadena City College, a distinctly second-rate institution. By all accounts he was a serious student. Here is what his contemporaries say about him:

"A taciturn individual who did not say very much . . . Friendly, really pleasant, but hard to get to know . . . He was so weak and scrawny, but always so neat. The other kids came to school in sweat shirts and jeans, but Sirhan always had a clean shirt . . . He was brilliant. He was studying Russian when everyone else was studying English and Spanish . . . He was calm and well-mannered, nothing evil about him . . . He dreamed of being something big in Jordan after his studies in the university . . .

Somehow, something went wrong with the neat dark boy with his white shirts and his big dreams.

The details are missing, but one senses a situation where the boy who wants to make good is dragged back by bad company. For Sirhan, the bad company seems to have included at least two of his brothers — the brothers the 7-year-old Sirhan had so desperately wanted to beat.

The brother with whom Sirhan bought the gun, Munir, was well-known as "Joe" in half-a-dozen seedy Hollywood night clubs frequented by Arabs and other immigrants from the Eastern Mediterranean.

Brothers in Trouble

This world of the Hollywood night spots exercised its pull on Joe early: several times he ran away from school. Police thought he had been "shacking up with older chicks" and he has subsequently been up on a narcotics charge involving marijuana.

Another brother, Sharif, got into more serious trouble, according to Pasadena police. He got a year on probation for attempted murder: a lenient sentence, considering he is said to have sawed through the brakes of his girl friend's car.

Even before he left the city college, Sirhan was earning a few dollars as a groom and exercise boy at the race track at Hollywood

Park. After he left, he went to work there as an exercise boy, walking horses to cool them off after training. Apparently he wanted to be a jockey, a despairing dream, for at 126 pound and 5-foot six he was a little big.

On Sept. 25, 1966, he was thrown from a horse and injured. Later Sirhan claimed that this fall had damaged his eyesight. His suit was settled out of court for \$2000.

Out of Work a Year

Almost a year after that he seems to have been out of work. Finally, last September he got a job as delivery boy at a health food store in Pasadena. He was paid \$2 an hour. His boss, a Dutch former resistance fighter, trusted him with large amounts of money, but ultimately found him impossible to employ.

"He was a man of principle. He didn't drink," said the employer. "He didn't smoke. He always said he wouldn't lie. But he was emotional. He resented authority. He didn't like to take orders." In the end, on March 7 this year, Sirhan was fired. It was the end of the line.

One of Los Angeles' leading psychiatrists suggested

that Sirhan was an interesting case because his latent hatred of authority—a Freudian might say this had something to do with his support of his mother against his father in the long marital struggle—was reinforced by his ideological attitudes.

What are Sirhan's attitudes? How did America crystalize the emotions of the young Arab immigrant? Mayor Sam Yorty of Los Angeles, a vehement anti-Communist, claims that Sirhan was pro-Communist, and specifically asserts that his car, an elderly pink De Soto, had been parked outside meetings of the DuBois Club on several occasions.

The DuBois Club has been identified by the FBI as a Communist front, but there is some doubt whether it has actually held any meetings in Los Angeles in the last three years. Mrs. Dorothy Healey, the very forthright secretary of the Communist Party here, dismisses Yorty's suggestion as "typical of an opportunist politician who wants to get his name in the news."

She said she had personally checked Sirhan's name with several of her young left-wing friends, none of whom had heard it. She then checked with his high school contemporaries, all of whom said that he was strongly anti-Communist and anti-Semitic.

At every stage of his life in America, in fact, those who knew Sirhan remember virulent outbreaks of anti-Semitism—at school, at the race track, at the health food store.

That appears to have been America's main contribution to Sirhan's development. In America—in a world where Arabs keep their heads above the black ghetto with difficulty, while Jews are among the wealthiest communities in the world—any Arab with the faintest tendency to paranoia might have a feeling that the enemy was closing in.

Mayor Yorty blurted out, and the police have confirmed, that when they

searched the Sirhan family's house in Pasadena they found two ring-back loose-leaf notebooks, each with about 18 to 20 pages.

In one of these Sirhan wrote—about May 17 and 18, the police think—"Kennedy must be assassinated before June 5." By May 17, Robert F. Kennedy had come out strongly for the supply of arms to Israel in his primary campaign. And June 5 was the first anniversary of the humiliating six-day war, which put Sirhan's family home into the power of Israel.

What happened in those last decisive days to Sirhan Bishara Sirhan is now the task of American justice to discover.



United Press International

Sirhan Bishara Sirhan, the accused assassin of Sen. Kennedy, is held by captors moments after shooting.