

by **ROBERT B. KAISER**

*For the seven months since his arrest, Sirhan Bishara Sirhan—who last week went on trial for the assassination of Robert Kennedy—has been held under unprecedented security in a 13th-floor cell of the Los Angeles Hall of Justice. Robert B. Kaiser, member of the defense team, is the only journalist to have visited Sirhan in jail*

## **Conversations in jail with Sirhan, a name meaning wolf**



Sirhan was thin, thinner than I imagined. One hundred fourteen pounds on a 5' 3" frame. He was wearing a pair of 49¢ Japanese plastic sandals and faded-blue, bell-bottomed prison jeans. No shirt at all. Hairy chest. He was puffing on a Muriel Perfecto cigar (he was then smoking 10 of them a day, purchased with money deposited for him by his family). In between puffs, he smiled, apparently amused by all the security that I and Sirhan's lawyer Russell Parsons had to go through—five locked gates, nine guards and three friskings. Sirhan's teeth shone in contrast to his dark, two-day stubble of a beard. When we shook hands his clasp was warm, strong.

Sirhan's cell is tiny—six feet wide and eight feet long, with a seatless toilet and a sink at the far end. We sat on chairs while Sirhan perched on the edge of his steel bunk, his knees practically touching mine. Once, in an earlier public hearing, I had seen Sirhan take Parsons' hand. He seemed to look on Parsons as a surrogate father. And here, it was much the same. Sirhan was a suppliant son, and at the head of his list of requests he wondered if Parsons had been able to locate two "Mexican-looking" men who had talked with him at the Ambassador Hotel on the night of the assassination. Parsons said he had found them and went on to reassure Sirhan that he and his chief investigator, Mike McCowan, were doing everything they could to help him.

At the beginning of our talks, Sirhan was wary. He preferred to talk not about his life but about

ideas and books he had read. Sirhan loved to read. When he was living in Pasadena, he told me, he used to get up in the morning, shower and shave, shine his shoes and set off for a nearby branch of the public library, where he would read all the latest periodicals and pore through the books in the stacks. Now, when he has a hard time getting to sleep in his cell, he reads. He has the deputies buy him slick magazines and bring him books from the public library. He ordered the Los Angeles Times every day until recently, when he became depressed by world events. "It's all violence, chaos, unrest," he said. "What ever happened to the old days, peace and quiet?" He likes *Esquire*, but a piece in the October issue by William F. Buckley Jr., on "The Politics of Assassination," drew his angry interest. Buckley wrote that Sirhan was "neither de jure nor de facto American. He was legally a Jordanian citizen. His loyalties were clearly to Jordan."

"What does he mean?" asked Sirhan, his eyes blazing. "Not American!" Later he told me, "I feel like an American. If I went back to Jordan I would be a foreigner." On another occasion, he said he felt like "a man without a country."

One thing is clear: even his name makes him feel set apart. "My name! My name!" he cries with real anguish. "Sear-hann Sear-hann. As soon as anyone heard it, everything else stopped. They wanted to know, 'What kind of name is that?' I began to associate more and more with my name. Sirhan means 'wolf' and I became more and more of a lone wolf."

It is hard for Sirhan Sirhan not to think of himself as someone different. During his boyhood in Jordan, his family lived with the uncertain rootlessness of displaced persons. In America, even though Sirhan did well in school, he recalls a sense of estrangement which began at John Muir High School in Pasadena. There, most of the

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*In exclusive pictures, taken at a meeting with his lawyer in jail, accused assassin Sirhan Sirhan is tense and brooding. In awe of his famous silver-haired attorney, Grant Cooper (left), Sirhan wonders that "he's defending a punk like me."*



In successive frames of a 16-mm movie shot by a UCLA cinema student at Ambassador rally before Kennedy arrived, a partially obscured face with Sirhan's features appears, and turns (arrows). Police studied the footage but have been unable to make a definite identification.

## Faces in the crowd that could be his

22

CONTINUED

kids walked to school—some, as Sirhan did, with holes worn in their shoes. Others drove their own cars, a few even Jaguars. "That's when I became aware of differences between me and them," says Sirhan. "That's when I knew I was different."

As we talked, a deputy sat in a heavy wooden chair about 15 feet away. But he was hardly able to hear. A jail radio had been turned up loud on station KGBS. It was one of the little ways that Sheriff Peter Pitchess could give Sirhan and his attorneys some privacy, but the blasting music became a bizarre counterpoint to our conversations. I remember once, in August, Sirhan was recounting the end of the scene in the service pantry of the Ambassador. "I felt a choking in my throat, and people were holding me, and beating me and twisting my left knee, and pounding my head on the table. They hurt my left eye. It still hurts." In the background in the jail cell, singing happily and loud, were the Beatles.

In late December, I paid another visit to Sirhan in his cell. He was now wearing a white T-shirt with a long-sleeved blue denim prison shirt over it and a pair of lined slippers instead of the Japanese sandals. By now he had become warmer toward me, more trusting, more open.

I noted that he had switched from Muriel Perfectos to Winstons. As he talked, he left his breakfast untouched—fried eggs and a piece of coffee cake and some fruit—and smoked an entire pack of cigarettes. "How many packs a day?" I asked.

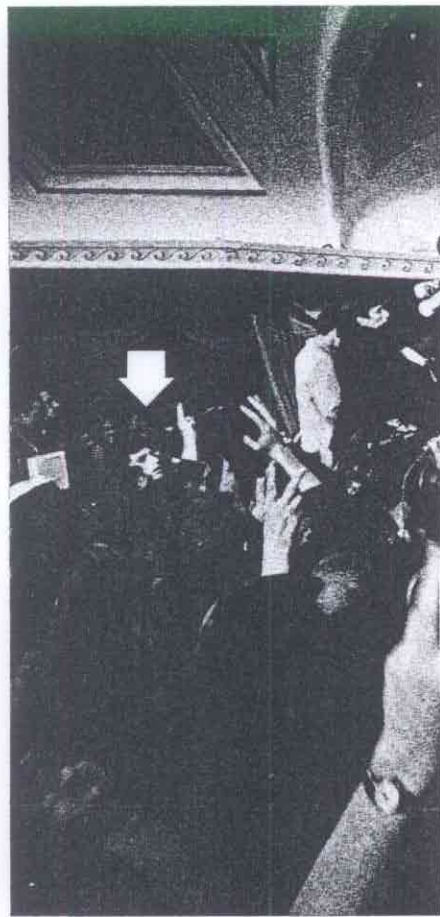
"Six," he said. "Three different brands."

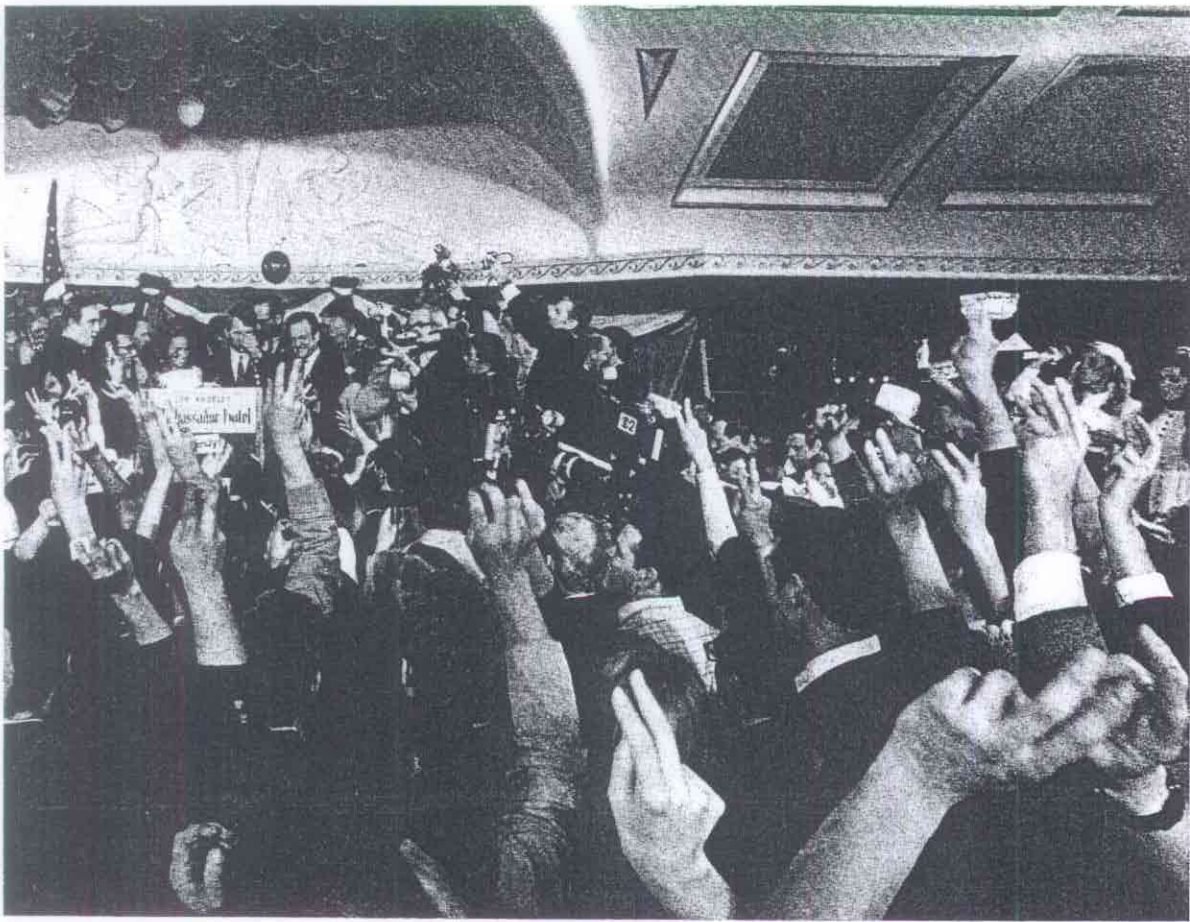
Like the cigarette smoke, Sirhan's face, I thought, had begun to turn gray. "Do you really think you ought to smoke so much?" I asked. He laughed grimly. "Nothing else to do."

Even his reading had grown grayer. In the summer, he had requested *Les Misérables*, by Victor Hugo, and *Witness*, by Whittaker Chambers. Now he had a college text on logic and a dry book on Indian philosophy. But my antismoking commercial seemed to take the next time I visited, two days later, Sirhan wasn't smoking at all. He was chewing gum.

Whenever his attorneys visit and talk about the strategy they are going to use in the trial, Sirhan reveals his interest in the intricacies

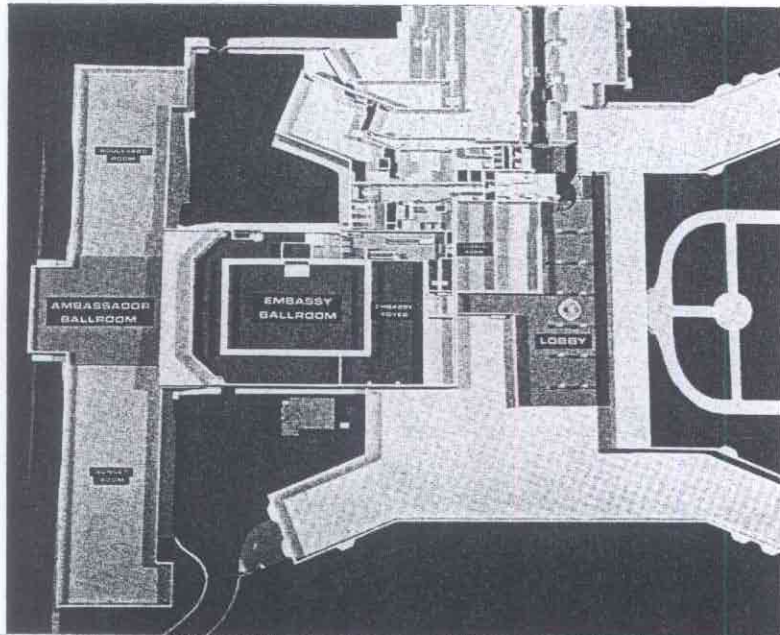
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Photograph taken after Kennedy's arrival at the rally, by Robert Shultz of the Los Angeles Herald-Examiner, later revealed profile similar to Sirhan's at far left, shown enlarged at left. Close-up indicates that upstretched arm belongs to another person. Picture was shot at 11:40 (note wristwatch in left foreground), 36 minutes before shooting occurred in kitchen area.

Cutaway mock-up of Ambassador Hotel floor plan shows where incidents of last June occurred. Kennedy left the podium in the Embassy Ballroom and headed toward the smaller Colonial Room, colored light blue at right, via the kitchens. Assassination took place in kitchen pantry area directly above Embassy Foyer, shown here colored a slightly darker blue. Model was constructed by the 45-man S.U.S.—for Special Unit Senator—of the Los Angeles Police Department.



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of American law. And he has developed a genuine respect for his attorneys, Russell Parsons and Grant Cooper. After Cooper, a West Coast trial lawyer who can command fees in six figures, entered this case, he persuaded two other men of stature to help him. One was Dr. Bernard Diamond, a forensic psychiatrist with chairs at three California faculties. The other was Emile Zola ("Zuke") Berman, a noted New York trial lawyer who won national attention in 1965 with a brilliant defense of Sgt. Matthew McKeon, the drill instructor who led the so-called Paris Island "Death March."

Berman is a Jew. So, for that matter, is Diamond. "I don't care if they are Jews," says Sirhan. "If Mr. Cooper wants them in the case, I want them." Similarly, when back in June Sirhan's brother Adel came to the jail with A. L. Wirin, the southern California attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union, Adel asked Sirhan: "You want this man to help you?"

"Yes," said Sirhan.

"He's a Jew, isn't he?" asked Adel. Adel has no apparent anti-Jewish bias, but he was testing his brother.

"Yes," said Sirhan, "but he's a good Jew."

'Death would be better,' she said

when she saw the cell

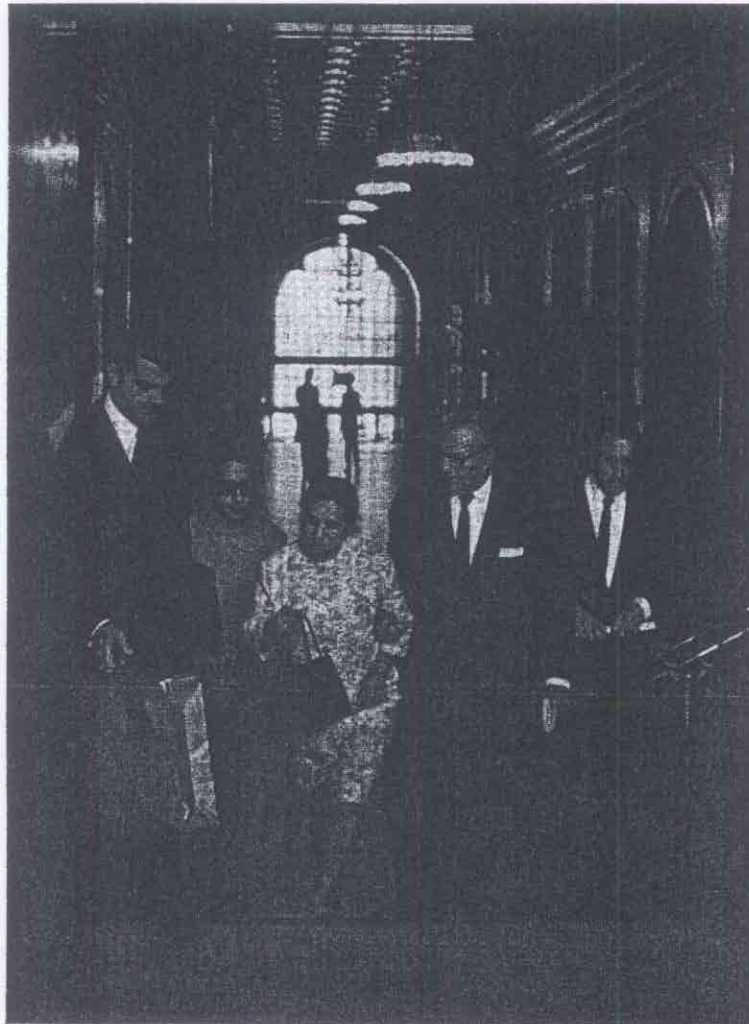
I started to leave. As the deputy closed the heavy sailcloth curtains around the cell, I thought of the words Mary Sirhan was reported to have said when she first saw Sirhan's cell: "Death would be better." But Sirhan's mother—a woman who says her prayers and reads her Bible every day—clings to the faith that somehow, some way, her son will be acquitted.

At the Sirhan home in Pasadena I asked Adel Sirhan how his mother was taking all this. "Sometimes," said Adel, "I think she is going to flip." But Mary Sirhan only smiles painfully at the same question. She is a tough old lady who has seen a lot of suffering and felt a lot of sorrow, and she has a pile of sympathetic letters to prove there are others in the world who understand her grief. One envelope contains a telegram from the mother of Lee Harvey Oswald. But Mary Sirhan is no longer on the mailing list of her Orthodox church, and that hurts.

The family members keep themselves closely informed about the legal procedures connected with Sirhan's defense. In addition, Mary

Sirhan keeps the June 14 issues of TIME and Newsweek on a buffet table in the dining room and the special Kennedy issues of LIFE and Look on the coffee table in the living room. She picks up the magazines now and then and talks to the face of Robert Kennedy on the TIME cover, telling him how sorry she is. Kennedy, moreover, talks to her. "It's O.K., Mary," she says he says. "I forgive you. It's O.K."

"I should hate to look at his picture," says Mary Sirhan. "But I have to. The look on his face... I keep going back to it." ◀



Sirhan's mother Mary brought him a new suit for the trial. Flanking her inside Hall of Justice are her youngest son Munir (with dark glasses) and Defense Attorney Russell Parsons. Sirhan's case is being heard by Judge Herbert V. Walker, at right, who sentenced Caryl Chessman and has sent 18 men to Death Row. He has a reputation for fair-mindedness. The trial is expected to go on for three months or more.

