

Angry Sirhan Demands Death

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LOS ANGELES, Feb. 28 — Sirhan Bishara Sirhan demanded his own execution in open court today, declaring defiantly that he "killed Robert Kennedy willfully and premeditatedly — with 20 years of malice aforethought."

Superior Court Judge Herbert V. Walker angrily refused to accept the plea, but

was unable to quiet the seething Arab without an abrupt recess.

The dramatic encounter came with the jury out of the room. Sirhan had been squirming in his seat over testimony about his dismal scores on high school aptitude and achievement tests.

Suddenly, he signaled his lawyers that he wanted to address the court, and the

jurors were led out before the outburst.

"At this time I wish to withdraw my original plea of innocent and plead guilty on all counts," Sirhan said, standing stiffly erect at the defense table.

Q. Do you understand what pleading guilty means?

A. I do.

Q. What do you want to do about the penalties?

A. I will ask to be executed.

Q. Why do you wish to withdraw the plea?

A. I believe it is in my best interests. That is my prerogative.

Sirhan said he wanted to admit that he killed Kennedy "willfully and premeditatedly — with 20 years of malice aforethought."

See SIRHAN, A8, Col. 1

SIRHAN, From A1

"The court will not accept the plea," said the judge. "I give you to understand here and now the court will not put up with any more interruptions. You just sit down."

"I do not want to have this shoved down my throat," said Sirhan. The judge attempted to interrupt, and Sirhan said: "Let me finish, sir."

Judge's Voice Rises

"I'll conduct the proceedings here," Walker replied, his voice rising sharply. "Sit down."

"I'm sorry, sir," Sirhan said. "I'll not accept you."

The judge said, "Any further interruptions by you will result in you being restrained," saying he was prepared to order a face mask to keep Sirhan silent and straps to keep him in his chair.

"I do not want this shoved down my throat," said Sirhan, adding that he would act as his own attorney and was dismissing his three defense lawyers, all volunteers.

The judge refused to permit him to fire his defenders.

Walker tried to proceed with the trial after a breathing spell, with Sirhan's sad-faced mother, Mary as the next witness.

Fighting back a rush of tears, she broke down on the stand, and the trial was recessed until Monday.

Earlier, a childhood playmate of Sirhan attested to the squalor and violence that, his lawyers say,

hounded him for life.

Ziad Hashimeh, 25, was called by the defense as it launched its case to counter the first-degree murder charge facing Sirhan.

Slender, swarthy but taller than Sirhan, the witness told of Sirhan's beatings at the hands of his father, starving children across the street and the shocks of sporadic warfare in the old, walled city of Jerusalem.

"He's a very sensitive human being," Hashimeh recalled. "Anything that hurts him, you know, he gets mad."

One episode in particular stood out. Hashimeh, who lived in the same unheated tenement that Sirhan did, couldn't pinpoint the date, but Sirhan would have been about 10 at the time.

"He started shouting, 'Mother, mother,'" Hashimeh said. Everyone in the

building heard him and the tenants began rushing downstairs.

They found Sirhan standing near the well with the rubber bucket that served to draw water from it.

A Dismembered Arm

"He was shaking like this," Hashimeh said, clenching his fists and squirming violently. Hashimeh remembered looking next at the bucket. There was a dismembered arm in it.

A used-jewelry salesman, Hashimeh said his family had been "expelled" by "Zionist soldiers" in 1948

from its apartment in New Jerusalem outside the walled city. After a year-long stay in the city of Hebron, he said, they moved to Old Jerusalem, where he first met Sirhan, who was just a month younger.

"It was a damaged house, destroyed . . . I would say, about 800 years old," Hashimeh testified. "We lived across the hall." Sirhan and he played together "mostly every day."

"father hit him?" chief defense counsel Grant B. Cooper asked.

"Oh, yeh, quite a few times," Hashimeh said. "He (Sirhan's father, Bishara) used to be too emotional. He used all sorts of things—hand, stick, you know." He would hit Sirhan "on the bottom, the back, everywhere."

Together, the witness went on, the two boys saw many things. Once there was an explosion in the grocery store on the corner. "The owner of the shop was, how do you say, 'exploded'? Quite a few other people were killed."

Food in Short Supply

Food, Hashimeh went on, was in short supply, coming largely from United Nations work and relief agency officials assigned to help poverty-stricken Palestinians. He said "quite a few villagers," particularly children, starved to death in the building across the street.

It was incidents such as these, the defense contends, that transformed Sirhan into a "sick and obsessed" psychotic who focused his hatred of Israel on Kennedy

without being fully aware of what he was doing.

Whatever the jurors at Sirhan's murder trial decide about that, the frail defendant had a grim childhood by any standard, Hashimeh made clear. He told of using dirty clothing for mattress stuffing, entire families heating themselves around inadequate braziers, and a foul-smelling room with a hole in the floor that the 50-odd tenants all used for a toilet.

"Every few months," he said with a shrug, "the department of whatever-it-is comes and cleans it."

Very Moralistic

Through it all, though, Sirhan remained a very moralistic boy, Hashimeh said. Once, he said, he wanted to steal an ice cream cone from a pushcart vendor who used to come by. Sirhan lectured him.

"He said, 'Ziad, do not steal,'" Hashimeh said. "He said (the vendor) makes just a few piastres a day for his whole family. He was very angry."

He was moody, too, Hashimeh testified, recalling a football game in the street when, for no apparent reason, "Sirhan started getting nervous. He said, 'Leave me alone, leave me alone.' He wouldn't talk to me."

The two Palestinians last saw each other in 1956, when Sirhan left for the United States with his mother. The defendant smiled awkwardly as his old playmate left the stand. They had a reunion in the "holding tank" next to the courtroom.