

Sirhan Sirhan:

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LOS ANGELES, Jan. 26 — The assassination of the presidential candidate has, for the moment, been forgotten in the old courthouse where Mary Sirhan's brightest boy is going on trial.

The charge is cold-blooded murder. The atmosphere has been clubby, congenial, and strangely oppressive.

The victim's name has only rarely been mentioned, as though that might somehow be bad form while the jurors were being picked. Everyone, after all, knows who Robert Francis Kennedy was.

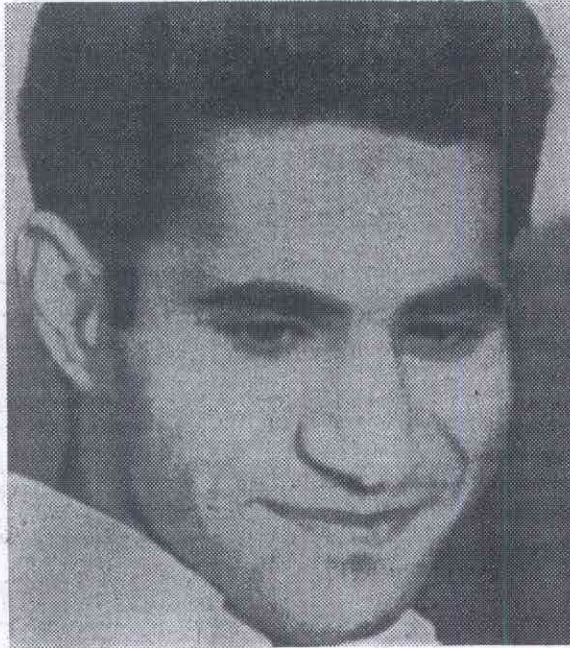
In room 832, its freshly cleaned beige drapes hiding matching beige armor plate, Superior Court Judge Herbert V. Walker presides in monotone, endlessly repeating the same set of instructions and questions for each prospective juror, one by one by one.

The caution is, no doubt, appropriate. It is also suffocating. Newsmen struggle to keep awake. Defense and prosecution lawyers take over with their questions. Now, at times, the judge seems to be struggling to stay awake, too.

Occasionally there are lighter moments.

During breaks, in the tightly guarded corridors, lawyers, reporters, sheriff's deputies and occasionally Sirhan's family joke and chat amiably about a score of topics: Niceties of law, the rain that has deluged sunny California for more than a week, the glare chief defense counsel Grant B. Cooper got from a tight-lipped blonde juror he rejected, anything and everything but the assassination at the Ambassador Hotel.

Now that a jury has been



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Sirhan smiles after one of trial postponements.

picked, it will have to be relived again, painfully. Probably no one realizes that more keenly than Mary Sirhan.

No one dies, she firmly believes, unless God wills it. And every night she lies awake in her Pasadena home praying that he will not require the life of her fourth son.

"We get our power and strength from God," she says softly. "That's how I get my strength every day."

With it the stocky Arab woman with owl-brown eyes makes her way each morning to the eighth floor of the Hall of Justice where female deputies take her to a blue-walled storage closet and frisk her.

Then she makes her way to the back row of the small,

stuffy courtroom to watch her 24-year-old, Sirhan B. Sirhan, face a murder charge.

At times she whispers in Arabic with the two other sons who usually come with her: Adel, 30, easygoing and affable, and Munir, 21, expressionless and uncommunicative. At times she grips the seat in front of her in anguish.

Sirhan, himself, with his bravado smiles, ostentatious

Main Question for the Sirhan Defense Is How Far to Push the Zionist Angle

waves and intermittent glances at sundry girls, displays less concern.

In the corridors at recess, the mother stands against a wall, lost in thought, smiling sadly at awkward pleasantries. The press, for the most part, leaves her to herself. There is nothing, really, to say.

But if Mrs. Sirhan is a sympathetic victim of circumstance, she is also a very tough woman. Not a few Arabs and Arab-Americans have expressed the view that the trial would be an ideal forum for "the Arab position" in the Middle East. There are signs that Mary Sirhan is pressing this view on her son's defense attorneys.

So far, the lawyers have said they intend to make Sirhan's "experiences" as a youth in Palestine a key issue in their effort to save Sirhan from the gas chamber. They plan to argue that the young Jordanian immigrant was so scarred, and so obsessed by the Arab-Israeli conflict that he was incapable of premeditated, first-degree murder when he shot down Senator Kennedy.

At the same time, the lawyers including Defense Counsel Emile Zola Berman,

who is Jewish, insist they will be able to stop short of trying the rights and wrongs of the Arab-Israeli conflict. In court the other day, Cooper alluded to it, only to add quickly that it "might

never become an issue" in the case.

Mary Sirhan caught him during a recess. "Don't say it won't become an issue," she is said to have told him. "It has to be."