## SIRHAN'S MOTIVES

*Unlike Lee Harvey Oswald, Sirhan Sirhan has lived to tell of his motivations—but he has chosen to remain silent. The only other potential source of information is his family, which had not spoken to the press.*

*Mahmoud Abdel-Hadi, an Egyptian correspondent for Akhbar Elyoum in Cairo, recently gained access to Sirhan's family. Based upon information supplied him by the family, he has written exclusively for* RAMPARTS *the following account of Sirhan's motivations and the strategy he plans for his trial.*

*Because of the forthcoming trial and the difficulty of dealing with this subject without emotional involvement, the editors of* RAMPARTS *have elected to present this information of historic interest to our readers without display, and in as objective a form as possible.*

BECAUSE I AM AN ARAB I was able to break through the barrier of suspicion that had stopped other journalists cold and obtain the first in-depth interviews the Sirhan family has given since the assassination. From their comments and from what Sirhan has said to them, a picture of the man and his motives begins to emerge, replacing the misleading portraits which have swamped the U.S. press.

The fact that Sirhan has not publicly discussed his trial is no accident. It is his own strategy, something he developed after thinking about it for long hours in his specially made jail cell. In fact, he has confided to his family that he will never make *any* statement unless special provisions are made for the courtroom proceedings. What Sirhan wants is, quite simply, publicity. He wants the major television networks to be allowed to broadcast the entire trial. If they do this, he says, he will tell all. "And if they refuse?" his brother Adel recently asked him. "Then I shall go to the gas chamber —silent," Sirhan replied.

To understand why Sirhan is indeed capable of such an act, one must understand that he is first and foremost an Arab, born in Palestine and consumed with interest in the Middle Eastern conflict. He is deeply committed to making his trial a public and political forum for the Arab position.

College educated, articulate and a voracious reader, Sirhan is confident about his own ability to cope with his predicament. His eldest brother, Shereif, told me that Sirhan studies the intricacies of his case as many as ten hours a day in his cell. Shereif recalls that Sirhan recently said to him, "I do not need a lawyer. I understand my case and know how to defend myself." But even so, Attorney Russell Parsons is defending his client, and doing it on Sirhan's own grounds. "The main issue," Parsons told me, "is to answer this question: why, for what reason, did Sirhan kill Robert Kennedy? There are 100 witnesses who saw Sirhan shooting Mr. Kennedy, but no one seems to know why he did it."

Sirhan and his attorney hope that the defense—presuming that the television networks are allowed into the courtroom—will show that Sirhan did not have "malice aforethought" in shooting Kennedy because the act was a political gesture, and that Kennedy, to Sirhan at least, was merely a symbol. His brother Adel notes that "if Sirhan was just an assassin, he could have done it in another way, just by having a gun with a telescope. He went to the Ambassador Hotel expecting to get caught; that is why he left his notes at home. I believe that Sirhan *wanted* to get caught so that he *could say what he believes*."

WHEN I FIRST TRIED to meet with the Sirhan family, I was refused. Security is extremely heavy around them, and they are understandably wary of new faces. Later, when I finally obtained an invitation to meet with them, Mrs. Sirhan apologized, I believe for having been inhospitable to a fellow Arab.

This family, which fled Jordan to seek greater safety and security than it had known, is now living in terror. They are somewhat at a loss to understand the events which have suddenly catapulted them into history. None of the four brothers goes to his job; they all feel that death follows them everywhere, and they move carefully, with a heavy guard. "Why don't you just leave this country?" I asked Shereif. "Where shall we go?" he answered. "To whom shall we leave our brother? Our land is under Israel's occupation." Shereif clarified his statement: "Our brother is in jail; we have to stay."

I sensed not only the Sirhans' confusion, but also some bitterness. They have not received any aid from the Arab countries, as they originally thought they might. Parsons is also somewhat surprised; he had hoped that the various local Arab consulates would help defray court costs.

Indeed, Los Angeles' Jordanian consul, who visited Sirhan in jail at Sirhan's request, indicated to me that the accused assassin had expected the Arab people to treat him as a hero. However, except for some Palestinian extremists, his act has been universally repudiated by the Arab world. One Arab newspaper has said editorially, "We don't feel any responsibility for this. It is the society that fed him with hostility, the society that gave him the gun, that is responsible." Members of the Arab Students' Association, of which Sirhan was once an officer, feel that the killing of Kennedy was a terrible mistake. One of them said to me, "What are we going to do with the rest of the American candidates? Kill them all because they want to help Israel?"

Still, the Sirhans' friends are primarily Arab, and they live in an atmosphere that is more Arab than American. The entire family spent a good deal of time discussing the Arab-Israeli conflict. The mother says that Sirhan was the most sensitive and the most involved during these discussions. Adel says that Sirhan once saw a television report of Robert Kennedy addressing the members of the Neveh Shalom Temple in Portland, Oregon. While in the synagogue, Kennedy, wearing a yarmulke, declared that the United States must help Israel against aggression from whatever source.

"Unlike the South Vietnamese," Kennedy said, "the Israelis have shown they are willing to fight for their own survival. Indeed, Israel is the very opposite of Vietnam: the Israeli government is very democratic, effective and free of corruption. Its people are united in its support." The senator then urged the Johnson Administration to proceed at once with the sale of 50 Phantom jet fighters to the Israeli Air Force and to cut off economic aid to the Arab countries. This whole episode made Sirhan very angry, Shereif recalls. "He left the room putting his hands on his ears and almost weeping."

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I asked Sirhan's mother why she thought her son had shot Kennedy. "Everything in this country was helping Sirhan," she maintained. "It was pushing him to the danger point. Everything, the propaganda of the Zionists, everything, was against his country, against his people."

Adel described Sirhan's current state of mind: "He feels he has done a terrible thing, but he feels now it is too late to be sorry. Now he wants Americans to listen to something they have never listened to."

And at their first meeting in the jail, Sirhan's mother said to him, "Shame on you. Why have you done such a thing?" He replied, "It's too late to speak of it. But all the Americans will know why."

—MAHMOUD ABDEL-HADI