

Informer's Security Stirs Row

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James H. Price Jr., the reputed Black Muslim government informer in the Hanafi Muslim massacre who was murdered Sunday in a Philadelphia prison, was housed in the same cellblock with four men his testimony had helped to bring to trial, his Philadelphia lawyer said yesterday.

"His presence with the others was consistent with his (Price's) position" that he had not cooperated with the government, said Joel S. Moldovsky, who had represented Price in several Philadelphia cases.

The four men, each sentenced to serve 140 years in prison following their convictions in the Jan. 18, 1973 slayings of seven Hanafi (Orthodox) Muslims on upper 16th Street NW, were at the Philadelphia prison awaiting sentencing on other charges.

Sources in Philadelphia said yesterday that officials there are focusing on two other Black Muslim inmates as prime suspects in Price's murder.

In the wake of Price's death by hanging and beating while three guards were on duty in the cellblock, anger and bitterness were expressed by Moldovsky, and by Price's widow and father.

They expressed disbelief at statements made Monday by Philadelphia Prison Supt. Louis S. Aytch, who said he had no knowledge until then of Price's reputed role as a government informer. Had he known, Aytch told The Washington Post, he would have taken stronger security measures to assure Price's safety.

According to a reporter's notes taken during the four-month murder trial, two Philadelphia prison officials who serve directly under Aytch testified about Price's security status at the Philadelphia Detention Center early last year.

Capt. Anthony Antonetti testified that he had read in a

Philadelphia newspaper that Price was going to be a government witness in the Hanafi case and that he was concerned about his safety.

Price requested the transfer to Philadelphia before the trial, federal prosecutors said, believing that his reunion with the other defendants would squelch any pretrial suspicions of an informer role. The prosecutors said that Price especially feared one defendant, John W. Clark, who was then incarcerated in Philadelphia.

Antonetti testified that he asked both Clark and Price if there was a problem, and both

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replied in the negative. "I put Price in isolation for a couple of hours to think about it," Antonetti said. Price then signed a waiver and was housed with Clark and others, according to testimony.

Repeated efforts to reach Aytch again yesterday were unsuccessful.

Price was to be the government's star witness in the Hanafi trial, but he refused to testify. Prosecutors said that he gave a statement to them and to a federal grand jury that indicted him and six other Philadelphia Black Muslims.

Yesterday, Price's widow and father disagreed over whether Price cooperated with the government. "To me, he did," his father, James H. Price Sr., said in a telephone interview. "He told me that at Baltimore City jail in July, 1973."

Moments later, from the same telephone, Price's widow, Josephine Price, asserted, "He didn't cooperate."

The senior Price, a supervisor with the Philadelphia water department, and the widow, who works in a Black Muslim bakery, were united, however, in their outrage over the murder.

"They killed my son out there," the father said. "He should have been given maximum security protection . . . I want the world to know my son didn't get adequate protection in this Philadelphia prison . . . He might be the worst person

in the world. But he's my son."

Mrs. Price said that she was "extremely angry."

"He never took the stand against anyone," she said.

Lawyer Moldovsky questioned the actions of Holmesburg Prison officials in leaving unlocked the otherwise vacant cell where Price was found hanged, and the whereabouts of three guards assigned in what Aytch had described as a "security cellblock."

"Price would have to have screamed and yelled. Why wasn't action taken?" Moldovsky asked. The medical examiner's report, Moldovsky said, showed Price had a puncture wound near the anus, bruise marks on his face and head and choke marks, some made by fingers, on his neck.

Roberts A. Shuker, chief of the U.S. attorney's D.C. Superior Court division and head of the Hanafi prosecution team, federal prosecutors were barred by court order from communicating with Price after his refusal to testify at the trial, and could do nothing to assure his safety.

"Price didn't want protection; that was the last thing in the world he wanted," Shuker said. Price wanted to be with the other defendants, he added. "He was trying so hard to convince them by his presence that he wasn't with the government. He wanted to go back to the fold."