

Memory Hazy After Seven Years

RFK Case Ballistics Expert Quizzed

9/18/77
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LOS ANGELES, Sept. 17— Seven years after the assassination of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy (D-N.Y.), the handling of the case has come back to haunt ballistics expert Wolfer.

Wolfer sat in a courtroom today facing a battery of nine lawyers, some friendly, but most of them pressing tough, piercing questions about his memory of the June 4, 1968, slaying of the presidential candidate and the subsequent conviction of Sirhan Sirhan as the lone gunman.

The two-day hearing, in Los Angeles County Superior Court, was a prelude to the re-examination of the ballistics evidence in the Kennedy case by an independent panel of seven experts, to begin on Monday.

Wolfer, a ballistics expert for the police department, submitted nervously to two days of questions about his testing of the bullets and his testimony at Sirhan's trial that they all came from one gun. Again and again, he replied: ". . . After seven years, I cannot recall." In some instances, he conceded that certain documents or elements of evidence were unavailable or apparently had been destroyed.

At issue was this question: Did Sirhan act alone, or, as some forensic experts are suggesting, was there a second gunman? The latter theory has grown recently to a full blown challenge of the original evidence in the Sirhan

case, and of the efficiency of the investigation.

The panel of seven experts was chosen from a list recommended by several interested parties to a lawsuit filed by sons wounded in the Ambassador Hotel pantry at the time Kennedy was killed. The panel, headed by Paul Schrader, one of five per- Kennedy was killed. The panel will begin Monday to re-examine bullets recovered from the scene, as well as test bullets apparently fired from Sirhan's gun by Wolfer.

The panel's secret tests, which might ultimately include refiring of the Sirhan weapon, will seek to determine four things, according to the court order by Judge Robert A. Wenke:

1. Is the condition of the exhibits now such that reliable identification can still be made? Wolfer and others have indicated that time, wear, and unauthorized handling of the bullets and the gun may have damaged the integrity of the evidence.

2. If the exhibits are altered, how did they get that way?

3. If identification can be made, does Wolfer's identification of all the bullets as coming from Sirhan's gun stand up?

4. Or, is there support for the conclusion that a second weapon was fired at the time of the assassination?

Today's hearings was to estab-

lish the kinds of tests Wolfer performed seven years ago, and determine that the bullets, cartridges and gun are the same ones Wolfer dealt with at that time.

But attorneys for Schrader, Sirhan, and CBS, the latter of which is seeking access to evidence for a documentary on assassinations, kept challenging Wolfer's technique, efficiency and recordkeeping.

"Did you mark the bullet you used in the comparison test?" CBS attorney Howard Privett demanded.

"Here today, I do not know," replied Wolfer.

"Did you keep any records

of such a marking?" Privett asked.

"Seven years later, I don't know if there was a record made."

"Did you make any effort to determine rifling marks, lands and grooves on the bullets?"

"I don't recall."

Throughout, Wolfer insisted that the Sirhan ballistics were a "routine" matter at the time, and therefore, by implication, did not require extensive, detailed recordkeeping. He reiterated his microscopic examination of striations on the recovered bullets and those test-fired by Wolfer showed conclusively that all came from a single weapon.