

A Life Turned Upside Down

Scholar With a Brilliant Future Drifts Into

By Joseph D. Whitaker

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At age 2, James Philip Kostman could assemble 300-piece jigsaw puzzles.

At 7, he was an accomplished pianist, playing the works of Bach and Beethoven.

At 17, he graduated first in his high school class. Then it was Princeton, Oxford on a coveted Fulbright fellowship, and Stanford for a doctorate in ancient Greek philosophy. In 1974, he was appointed assistant professor of philosophy at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

And late last month, at age 31, Kostman was standing unwashed, bleary-eyed and bedraggled before a D.C. Superior Court Judge, facing attempted burglary and unlawful entry charges for the second time in a week.

Just what turned Kostman's life upside down? He said it was pressure to

do well, his own inability to cope with life, and the disillusionment he felt when his extraordinary achievements did not make him socially and financially secure.

As he sat on the steps of a shelter for homeless men the other day, eating a Big Mac, Kostman said he always felt pressure as a child "to perform well in school, get good grades, and enter a good profession."

Kostman said he initially had mixed feelings about becoming a university professor. But gradually he became committed to the idea.

"Back in the late 1960s there was the promise of a solid career for people who went into teaching [at the university level]," Kostman said. "And there were a lot of reasons for optimism." But Kostman said shifts in the national economy and a declining demand for scholars with doctoral degree made him wonder about his future.

"It became clear to me when I was finishing my Ph.D. at Stanford in 1974 that after all those years of preparation, I might not be able to find a decent job," Kostman said. "For a while I was really scared. Then I lucked out and got an offer to teach at MIT."

When he arrived, Kostman said he found himself surrounded by professors who, like himself, were "young, bright and highly motivated."

"There were a lot of professors in that philosophy department my same age and with similar credentials," Kostman said. When the linguistics and philosophy departments merged in 1977, Kostman said he felt some faculty members—including himself—might be fired.

"It was a situation where I didn't have tenure and it began to look as though I might never be a tenured professor at MIT," he said.

"I used to tell my graduate students that they could well be wasting their

APRIL 8, 1979

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Poverty, Jail

time," Kostman said. "They were going deeper and deeper into debt preparing for a job that might not be there. Meanwhile, their families often lived very meager existences."

After teaching three years at MIT, Kostman requested a year's leave of absence to accept a \$10,000 teaching fellowship at the University of California at Berkeley and the University of Michigan. He said he needed time to think about his future.

Sylvain Bromberger, chairman of the philosophy division of the MIT department of linguistics and philosophy, said Kostman was regarded as "exceptionally qualified" in his field and was considered a gifted teacher of philosophy.

"Of course Jim didn't have tenure and I suppose people in that position go through a great deal of anxiety," Bromberger said. "But Jim didn't

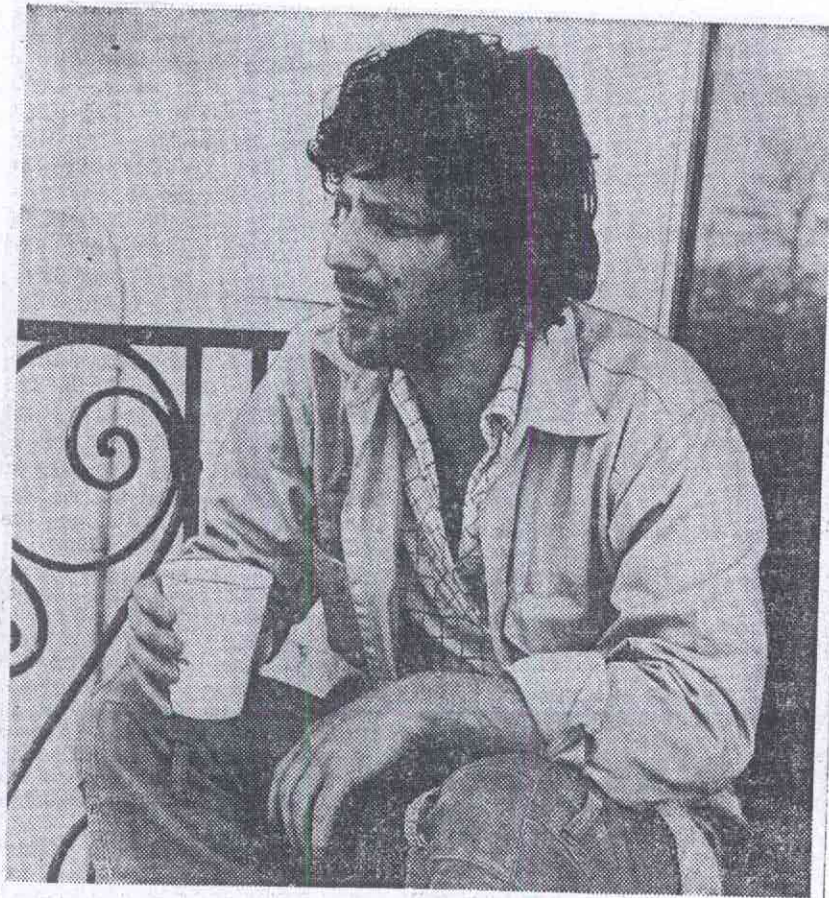
See KOSTMAN, B5, Col. 1



By Douglas Chevalier—The Washington Post

James P. Kostman, former professor of philosophy.

"It became clear to me when I was finishing my Ph.D. ... that I might not be able to find a decent job. For a while I was really scared."



By Douglas Chevallier—The Washington Post

Kostman sits on steps of a shelter for homeless men in Northwest Washington.

KOSTMAN, From B1

have to worry about his job. When he went on leave his contract had been renewed for three more years and we expected him back."

"Ironically, nobody was fired because of the philosophy department merger," Bromberger said. "Most of the people who came when Jim was here are still here."

During his first year at MIT, Kostman said he was divorced from his wife, Stephanie. They had met while he was at Princeton and she was a student at Sarah Lawrence College. They married during the second year of his Fulbright Fellowship, but later found they were incompatible in many ways, Kostman said.

"By my third year at MIT, I had discovered that although I was extremely well prepared to teach the works of Aristotle and Plato, I did not enjoy what I was doing," Kostman said. "I wanted to do something that was fun."

By the summer of 1977, at the conclusion of his teaching fellowship, Kostman said he decided to chuck his teaching career and to pursue an interest in researching the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

"I'd worked occasionally with the Assassination Information Bureau in Cambridge while I was at MIT," he said. "When the organization opened a Washington office in mid-1977, I moved to Washington and became their director of research."

Kostman said he was not paid for his work with the bureau, a nonprofit research group that studies domestic assassinations and has an office at 1322 18th St. NW.

"We (the group) lived on a shoestring budget. We lived in a house where the organization paid the rent," Kostman said. "I subsisted mostly on coffee. It was not a comfortable lifestyle. But for the first time I was doing something I wanted to do. It was interesting and it was fun."

Jeff Goldberg, co-director of the bureau, described Kostman as "a very bright guy" who primarily spent his time researching various aspects of the Kennedy assassinations.

According to Goldberg, Kostman began to wrestle with emotional problems last fall and could no longer function "at top form" as the group's researcher. Goldberg said Kostman "dropped out of sight" at the end of last year, but emerged again several weeks before he was arrested.

Kostman said he left the bureau last October after he and other members of the group could not agree on the future role of the organization or how to improve its financial outlook.

In late December, Kostman showed

up at the home of his parents in suburban Philadelphia suffering from depression and anxiety, according to his father, Arthur Kostman, 60, who is a partner in a firm of certified public accountants.

James Kostman, the oldest of three Kostman sons, was admitted to the Philadelphia Psychiatric Center, where he was treated five days for anxiety and released on an outpatient basis, according to his father.

Perhaps the most distressing episodes in Kostman's life came when he returned to Washington in mid-February. He checked into the Christian Inn, a \$18-a-night hotel at 1509 16th St. NW, and said he spent his days "wandering around the streets of Washington."

"Washington is a beautiful city in the spring," Kostman said. "I wanted to be here to see the cherry blossoms."

On March 13, Kostman was asked to move out of the hotel because his room had been reserved by another customer, said Dorothy Walker, a desk clerk.

At 5:15 the next morning, Kostman was arrested and charged with unlawful entry after he climbed a ladder to get into a vacant second-floor apartment at 1815 18th St. NW.

A week later, at 1 a.m., Kostman was arrested again and charged with attempted second-degree burglary. Kostman said he was simply "sitting on the steps" in front of a residence at 1837 Swann St. NW.

But according to a police report, Third District police officer Joseph Vanderboemen saw Kostman at 12:45 a.m. going from door to door along Swann Street, looking through windows and testing doors of homes in the area. Vanderboemen followed Kostman and arrested him after Kostman ripped through a screen door and attempted to open the wooden door behind it, according to the report.

(Under the D.C. Code, a charge of attempted second-degree burglary can be brought when a person is sus-

pected of attempting to enter or break into a building usually not used for sleeping with the intent of taking items away from the building. The offense is a misdemeanor with a maximum penalty of either one year in jail, a \$1,000 fine or both.)

After the first arrest, Kostman was held at the D. C. jail for seven days because he had no fixed address. His attorney, James Hipskind, could not find anyone willing to take custody of Kostman until his case came to trial.

Arthur Kostman said he, his wife, Pearl, and youngest son, Jay, a chemistry student at Cornell University, drove to Washington on March 19 and spent 12 hours searching for his son.

"We checked all of the shelters for the homeless, the hospitals, the morgue, and police put out a missing person bulletin," said Arthur Kostman. "But we never thought to check the jail." Arthur Kostman also hired a private detective, Ken Smith, to help look for his son.

On Wednesday afternoon, March 21, Judge Joseph M. Hannon released Kostman into the custody of the Bureau of Rehabilitation, a pretrial supervisory services organization. Under the arrangement with the court, Kostman was to live at the city's shelters for the homeless until his case came to trial.

Early the next morning, Kostman was arrested the second time. This time Judge Alfred Burka placed Kostman in the custody of his parents, who had returned to the city to help their son. Burka ordered Kostman not be seen on the streets of Washington again, except in the presence of his parents.

Government prosecutors agreed to drop both cases against Kostman if he returns to Philadelphia and receives psychiatric care for the next six months.

"I love my son," said Arthur Kostman. "Everything we've tried to do for him has been because of that. We recognized when he was very young that Jim had superior intellectual capabilities and we wanted to see his potential developed."

"I've never seen Jim as an Einstein or a genius," Kostman said. "Our only hope was that he find happiness in life."

"I have two other sons and we felt the same way about them," Kostman continued. "All I've ever wanted is that my sons find some sense of fulfillment, however each one chose to do it."

When he was released from jail, wearing scuffed cowboy boots, purple jeans and with a week's growth of beard, Jim Kostman said, "I don't see all that has happened as a complete tragedy. But life is a continuing pattern of growth and development and I see this as another phase of that pattern."