

Sirhan Defended As 'Sick'

RFK Slaying Called Product Of Obsession

By George Lardner Jr.
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—Sirhan Bishara Sirhan's lawyers defended him today as a "sick and obsessed" mystic who killed Sen. Robert F. Kennedy in a hypnotic trance.

The young Palestinian Arab had to be physically restrained as defense counsel Emile Zola Berman went before a Superior Court jury here to call his client one of life's losers, a failure "preoccupied with fantastical obsessions of hatred, suspicion and distrust."

The frail, 24-year-old defendant jumped to the edge of the seat, plainly upset. He shook his head back and forth, and murmured "no, no." His eyes seemed to be glistening.

Asks for Help

Inspector William Conroy, the sheriff's deputy in charge of security, put a hand on the defendant's back and muttered to chief defense investigator Michael McCowan for help.

"I had to physically put him down," McCowan said later. "He'd never read the statement."

"We said he was emotionally ill, and quick to anger. That's what he is. But he doesn't believe it. He doesn't think there's anything wrong with him."

In a dramatic opening statement that lasted only 15 minutes, Berman said there was everything wrong.

"There is no doubt," he told the jurors, "that he did in fact fire the shot that killed Sen. Kennedy" in the Ambassador

Hotel here last June 5.

Called Unplanned

But, the balding lawyer said, "That killing was unplanned and undeliberate, impulsive and without premeditation or malice—totally the product of a sick and obsessed mind and warped personality."

"At the actual moment of the shooting," Berman went on, "he was out of contact with reality, in a trance . . . in which he had no voluntary control over his will, his judgment, his feelings and his actions."

See SIRHAN, A12, Col. 1

SIRHAN, From A1

Later, in their questioning of witnesses, the defense sought to hint that a bank of mirrors near the entrance to the hotel's Embassy Room may have been instrumental in putting him under a spell.

Sirhan, Berman said, even used to conduct "mystical experiments in his room," concentrating on a hanging lead sinker and making it swing back and forth "by the power of his mind," or looking at a candle flame and making it dance, "first to the right and then to the left."

Sirhan abandoned such practices for awhile, the attorney declared, but after Sen. Kennedy advocated sending some 50 Phantom jets to Israel, Sirhan went "back to mysticism."

At times, the jury was told, he would stare into the mirror in his room and think about the Senator "until at last, he saw his own face no longer, but that of Senator Kennedy himself . . ."

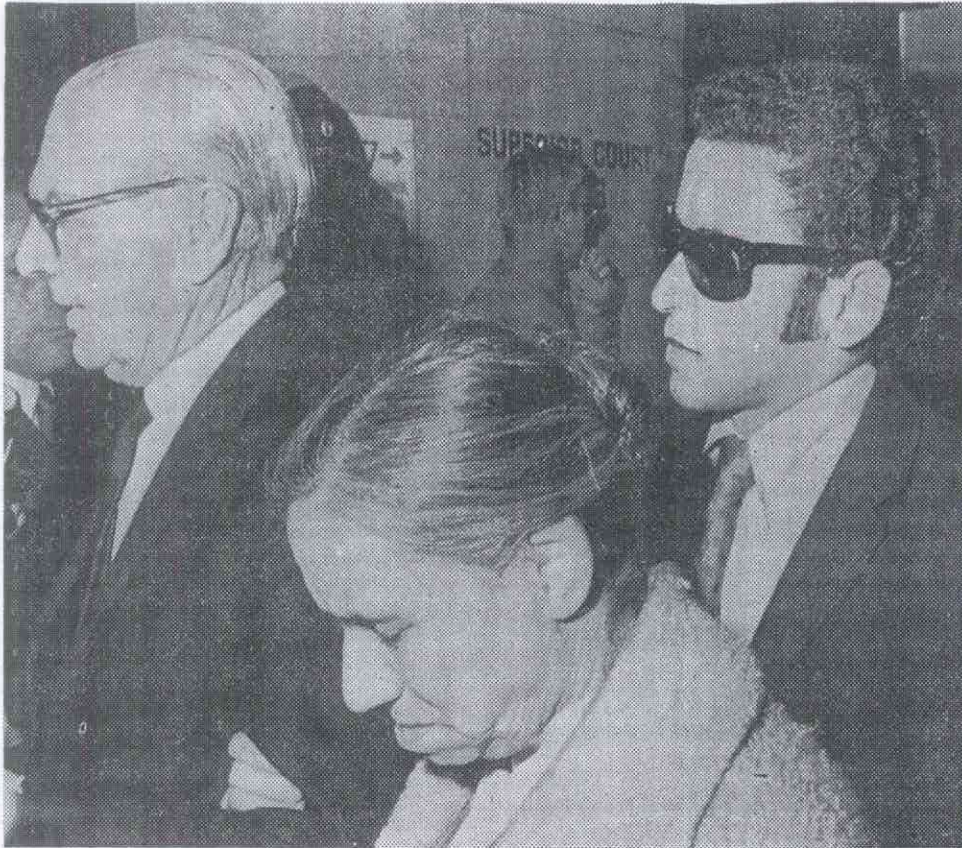
"Now this isn't Berman talking," the lawyer kept repeating. "Men of science," he said, would attest to it. Sirhan, he insisted, actually admired and loved" the New York Senator.

The sickness, the 65-year-old Jewish attorney said, began when war broke out between Palestinian Arabs and Zionists in Palestine in 1947.

Sirhan was only three years old then, but the street he lived on, the attorney said, was rocked by gunfire. In fact, he said, it "became the dividing line between the Jews on the one side and the Arabs on the other."

One night, Berman told the jurors, many of them busily scribbling notes, the building he lived in became a machine gun nest. On another night, his home was bombed. The horrors of war sank in deeply. It was then, Berman said, that he first went into a spell.

As a child, he said, Sirhan saw a little girl's leg blown off by a bomb, "the blood spurting from below her knee, as



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Russell Parsons, left, a defense attorney for Sirhan, his brother, Munir Sirhan, and mother, Mary, leave courtroom Thursday after motion for a mistrial was denied.

though from a faucet. He went into a spell, he stiffened, his face contorted, he was out of contact with reality, and lost all sense of where he was or what was happening to him."

On another occasion, a bomb exploded while Sirhan was playing near the Damascus Gate. He "remained in a trance for four days," Berman said. It happened still again, he told the jury, when a bomb exploded outside the window of the Sirhan flat and tore a man apart.

On coming to America, Sirhan was a repeated failure—an outsider at high school "who just didn't fit in," a college reject who was dismissed in his sophomore year because of failing marks in four subjects. He got a job at a gas station and played the horses with his earnings. "And once

again," Berman said, "defeat."

From there, he tried to become a jockey, but he was thrown from a horse and that ended that. "Another failure."

It was here that Sirhan stirred in his seat and began protesting. But Berman went on. Sirhan, he said, became more irritable, brooding and preoccupied. He took to reading books on mysticism and making jottings in notebooks.

The attorney read one entry, dated June 2, 1967. It was styled a "Declaration of war against American humanity."

In it, the unpredictable Jordanian immigrant wrote that "the victims of the party in favor of this declaration will be or are now the President,

the Vice-President, etc., down the ladder."

"The author of this memorandum," Sirhan also wrote, "expresses his wishes very bluntly that he wants to be recorded by history as the man who triggered off the last world war."

By that, Berman said, "I gather he meant the last war ever to be."

Three days later, the six-day Arab-Israeli war broke out. Sirhan saw and heard repeated accounts of the lightning Israeli victory.

"All this," Berman said, "triggered his spells. In his fantasies he was often a hero and savior of his people. In the realities of life, however, as our doctor will tell you, he was small, helpless, isolated, confused and bewildered by emotions over which he had absolutely no control."

It was then that "the mystical experiments" were said to have started. Then six months before the assassination Sirhan and his brother bought a .22-caliber revolver.

Sirhan tried it out at various gun ranges around Los Angeles. "The shooting," Berman said, "gave him a strange sense of release," much more than mysticism had done.

Sen. Kennedy's advocacy of jets for Israel, however, came as a "heavy shock." Sirhan, Berman said, would act out his anger by staring into the mirror, and fantasize about killing the New York Senator.

But the defendant, the attorney declared, never really thought he would actually do it. The slaying, Berman asserted, came about "through a weird chain of circumstances" while Sirhan was "in a disturbed mental state . . . that same kind of trance" that he had as a boy in Palestine.

"We ask you to listen to the evidence, to adopt what science has to offer, to consult your conscience," Berman concluded. "In short, let true justice be done."