

KRISHNA: Dissident Devotee's Killing Probed

Martin Abzug, Husband of Ex-Congresswoman, Dies

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Martin Abzug

Martin Abzug, the son of an immigrant garment cutter who became a successful Wall Street broker and then wrote two novels, one of them depicting his experiences as a poor youth in New York City, died Friday of a heart attack.

Abzug, the husband of former U.S. Rep. Bella Abzug, was 69 and was stricken at his Greenwich Village apartment in lower Manhattan.

Ruth Price, a spokeswoman for Bella Abzug's current congressional campaign, said she and other staffers were told of Abzug's death at a 9:30 a.m. meeting at her law office in White Plains, north of New York City.

In a 1971 interview with the Washington Post, Abzug reflected on what it was like to live with a flamboyant feminist addicted to colorful hats and a matching vocabulary.

"She's got a lot of guts, that woman, more guts than the whole damned Army," he recalled of her 1950 trip to Mississippi where his wife, an attorney and seven months pregnant, represented a black man convicted of raping a white woman. She so feared for her safety that she slept sitting up in a bus station.

And although they "disagreed on almost everything" political, their biggest fight was over her decision to run for Congress in 1970.

"I thought she didn't have a chance."

She became the first Jewish woman ever sent to Capitol Hill.

Abzug said that although he was sympathetic to the feminist movement he found some of its champions—particularly Kate Millet and Betty Friedan—not to his taste. He also acknowledged that despite his initial fears of being overwhelmed he had learned over their 40-year marriage to listen to his wife's advice. "When I haven't... I've suffered, including financially in the stock market."

He attributed his reticence to live in her shadow to his own stubbornness. "I didn't want to be

dominated."

And he defended his wife as "feminine" despite her propensity for language heard more on the street than in the hallowed halls of Congress. "The best I can describe is she's hard on the outside and soft on the inside."

In 1947 Abzug wrote "Seventh Avenue Story," about his youth in the garment district and his own experiences as a cutter and salesman. In 1950 he published a war novel, "Spearhead."

He had intended to be a writer and editor but became attracted to the stock market after editing an economist's newsletter.

Bella Abzug has been attempting to re-enter politics as a Democratic candidate in the 20th Congressional District in Westchester County. She represented Manhattan during her six years in Congress before being defeated in races for the U.S. Senate and mayor of New York.

The couple have two daughters—Eve, a sculptor, and Liz, a lawyer.

Disagreements Not Allowed

One longtime Krishna follower, who said he had been "roughed up" by disciples because of his open disagreements with the new guru, said serious criticism of the leadership is interpreted by loyal followers as "blasphemy against their spiritual master, [meaning] you can take action against [the offenders]."

Yet another dissident in California agreed: "No one is supposed to question these guys. You worship them as perfect or you are in trouble."

With the matter of authority in the movement still unresolved, the number of gurus has grown from about 20 last year to nearly three dozen.

"There has been a lot of negotiation and infighting in the society recently, but I think the political situation can be rectified," said Nalini Kanta (Tom Hopke), a Los Angeles devotee. He said he is the Peace and Freedom Party candidate for Congress in the 23rd District this year and an astrologer for the Krishna movement.

"I've been vocally opposed [to abuses], but I'm not fearful for my own life," Nalini Kanta said, indicating that he is not at all as "vociferous, so radical" as Bryant was.

Dictatorial Rule

He said a big group of one-time disciples of the founder "think [the movement] is run in a very authoritarian way now and that it should be done in a more cooperative way. I am against the philosophy that one particular guru should have dictatorial rule in his area. Prabhupada could do that because of his purity."

Former Berkeley temple official Paramahansa Swami said the root of the dispute is really spiritual authority. The reform influence at Berkeley and the conservative ideology at New Vrindaban "are exactly at the opposite ends of the spiritual movement," Nalini Kanta said.

"In the last three years in that temple, 10 different people have 10 different philosophies," said Paramahansa, who maintained that the unquestioned authority of a spiritually qualified master is necessary to avoid religious "anarchy."

nearly empty, Piatt said.

"We think he was in the process of activating those plans [to leave the country]," Piatt said.

The Krishna priest, Terry Sheldon, was held for three days on a charge of carrying a concealed weapon—a hooked-blade utility knife—but the charge was dismissed. He has since disappeared from the Cleveland temple and his whereabouts are unknown, Piatt said.

The detective added that a fire of undetermined origin burned Drescher's mobile home July 5.

Drescher is now in custody in West Virginia. The Los Angeles County district attorney's office is seeking to extradite him to California to stand trial for Bryant's murder.

New Vrindaban officials have denied any connection with Bryant's death and characterized Drescher as a follower who fell from favor with the community three years ago. After living on his own property near New Vrindaban for several years, Drescher moved to northeast Ohio late last year.

Apology From Jail

Swami Bhaktipada said Drescher wrote him from jail to apologize if he had caused the commune any difficulty. The guru said he responded with a short note advising Drescher "to chant the name of God and to depend on God's help and mercy."

New Vrindaban spokesman Dick Dezio said he welcomed the announced plans of U.S. Atty. William Kolibash to have a federal grand jury in Moundsville examine the murder of Bryant and the dissident's charges of illicit activities at New Vrindaban.

Bhaktipada declared earlier that the investigation will show "we are religious people who have no other business but to worship God."

Dezio accused Bryant of some of the same charges Bryant had leveled against the West Virginia commune—drug use, "a fetish for guns," child abuse and threats of violence.

"We have heard a lot of stories and a lot of claims, but no one has ever come forth with any evidence [about our community]," Dezio said. Regarding interviewed dissidents who declined to reveal their identities in print for fear of reprisals, Dezio said, "I don't know anyone within the movement who has to be feared."

Charges by dissidents that a climate of fear prevails in the movement were also rejected by Los Angeles-based guru Ramesvara (Robert Grant), 35, who said that, other than Bryant's death, there has been "no incidence of

violence against a disgruntled person" in his jurisdiction. Ramesvara, who is one of the original 11 successors to the society founder, supervises Southern California, parts of the Midwest, the New York area, Hawaii and Japan.

"As far as I know, Steve Bryant didn't have any bad feelings toward myself and, similarly, I had no bad feeling toward him," Ramesvara said. "He wasn't disturbing us. He came and went very secretly. A number of our core members attended his funeral in Los Angeles; they wanted to show their sympathy and outrage."

At the Berkeley temple, where another of Steve Bryant's vehicles still sits in the parking lot, Jagat Guru (Jack Hebner), the reform-minded temple president, said: "I can't bring myself to believe, though some do, that Bryant's death would be ordered."

"I feel his assassins are fringe members who took it upon themselves to do it. But whatever the truth is, we do not want it to be hidden," Jagat Guru said.

Krishna followers interested in reform have grown steadily to about half of the leadership ranks, most of them longtime followers initiated by the sect's founder, Jagat Guru said.

"There is no room and no tolerance of infractions in the garb of a preacher who is interested in simply taking church money for liquor, drugs, women or whatever else he might enjoy," he said.

Murky Authority

The society has an international Governing Body Commission, but William Ogle, a Knoxville, Tenn., lawyer who acts as its general counsel, conceded in an interview that the administrative authority of the commission in relation to the gurus is still murky. "It is no secret, we are going through a serious developmental state in the aftermath of the founder's departure," Ogle said.

On July 11, the commission's executive committee announced that it had started its own investigation into Bryant's death. "We want to find out if anyone in our group was involved and if so, to what extent. We would take disciplinary action irrespective of what position the person held in the society," said Michael Grant, public affairs director for the Los Angeles temple, who said he spoke on behalf of the executive committee.

When Ogle served as commission chairman in 1985, he directed a special committee to look into Bryant's allegations.

The committee concluded that it was an "injudicious mistake" for New Vrindaban to initiate Bryant's

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Bryant left a friend's home in the Palms section of Los Angeles' Westside, telling him he was going to park his van down the block so as not to bring trouble to his friend's doorstep. "I try not to be paranoid, but it's the least precaution I can take," his friend quoted Bryant as saying. Not long afterward, the friend said he heard two shots and ran outside to look, but then dismissed his fears that something had happened to Bryant.

Later that morning, Bryant, known as Sulocana to other devotees, was found shot twice in the head and slumped over the steering wheel of his parked and locked van, according to authorities.

Some of his friends told Los Angeles police to look for a man named Tirtha, the Krishna name for Thomas Arthur Drescher, 37, a one-time follower at New Vrindaban with a reputation for violent behavior.

Five days later Drescher was arrested in Kent, Ohio. The warrant for his arrest, however, was issued by West Virginia authorities in connection with the unsolved disappearance in 1983 of another former Krishna devotee, Charles St. Denis, from the New Vrindaban area.

(Drescher was indicted earlier this month in Moundsville along with Krishna devotee Daniel Reid, 31, who is lodged in a Los Angeles jail, on first-degree murder charges based on witnesses' accounts of St. Denis' fate. The principal witness, Randol Carter, was seriously injured in an explosion at his home the day after Drescher was apprehended in Ohio, authorities said. A number of commune members, according to their attorney, James B. Lees, have quietly cooperated with authorities since 1984 in the investigation of the St. Denis disappearance.)

'Surveillance Notes'

Kent Police Detective Ronald Piatt and his partner said that when they arrested Drescher, they found on him "surveillance notes" describing Bryant's van, his physical appearance and his movements in Los Angeles. Drescher also carried \$4,000 in cash.

With Drescher when he was arrested, Piatt said, was a Krishna priest from Cleveland who had clippings from three newspapers about the death of Bryant and written instructions of unknown origin saying that if Drescher were ever wanted by police, he should be sent to a temple in New York, then flown to India. At the time of his arrest, Drescher's car was packed with clothing and other goods, and his rented mobile home was found

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