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## A Tale of Murder Among the Hare Krishnas : Crime: The trial of a lifelong Krishna devotee accused of assassinating an embittered former cult member in 1986 promises a story of treachery and espionage.

October 28, 1990 | DAVID FERRELL | TIMES STAFF WRITER



Among the spiritual leaders of Hare Krishna, embittered former member Stephen Bryant was considered a dangerous man. Outfitted with a rifle, a computer and a small bed, the 33-year-old Bryant traveled the country in his van, writing and preaching attacks on the Hindu religious sect.

It was feared that the zealous Bryant might harm, even kill, the swamis who ran Hare Krishna temples in Moundsville, W. Va., and West Los Angeles.

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But late one night in 1986, death ended Bryant's crusade. While seated in his van only blocks from the West Los Angeles temple, he was shot twice in the head with a .45-caliber handgun. Police later arrested Thomas Drescher, now 42, a lifelong Krishna devotee who has acknowledged conducting a long odyssey of secret surveillance against Bryant.

Drescher's murder trial, which resumes Monday in Van Nuys Superior Court, presents a tale of treachery and espionage that crisscrosses state lines, from tiny motels in Ohio to abandoned mine shafts in California's Apple Valley. The death penalty case also raises questions about the granting of immunity from prosecution because the three key witnesses against Drescher came forward only under protection from the law.

One of those witnesses, defense attorneys claim, is the more likely killer, based on the scant evidence.

"The prosecution has not only given immunity to the wrong person, but the wrong person is on trial and you should ask yourself why," defense attorney Madelynn Kopple told jurors this week in opening statements. "There may be a dead body and there may be a number of immunized witnesses. But what you don't have in this case . . . (are) eyewitnesses.

"You will not see or hear anything about fingerprints in this case . . . or hear anything about hair samples, for example. You will not see a murder weapon. There was no murder weapon found."

Indictment: Officials contend that everything but the commune temple was purchased with money obtained under false pretenses.

*June 2, 1990*

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The case against Drescher is based largely on the detailed accounts of men who knew him during the weeks he tracked Bryant. Those witnesses--including a onetime Krishna security guard in Los Angeles named Jeffrey Breier--say Drescher carefully plotted Bryant's assassination and scouted the secluded mine shafts as a possible place to dump the body.

It is alleged that Drescher was to receive \$8,000 for killing Bryant in order to protect the swami Bahktipada, whose 4,000-acre site in West Virginia was one of the largest Hare Krishna temples in the United States.

However, defense attorney Barry Levine said a witness who lived near the murder scene will testify to seeing a sports car speed away just after the shots were heard--a car more similar to Breier's Alfa Romeo than to Drescher's rented four-door Chevrolet.

Breier, who lived in a one-room apartment at the temple in West Los Angeles, was paid to protect the swami Rameswar, who was considered another possible target of Bryant's anger.

Bryant had lived at the West Virginia temple for several years in the early 1980s and blamed the Krishnas for the breakup of his marriage. He attracted publicity in West Virginia for his allegations that the temple there was involved in drug abuse and prostitution. And he later expanded his campaign to the temple in West Los Angeles.

Levine said gun records will be introduced to show that Breier owned three .45-caliber pistols. Yet when questioned by police who considered him a suspect, Breier turned over only one of the .45s, Levine said, telling detectives that at least one of the others had been stolen.

"We can prove that Tom Drescher was not in L.A. at the time of the shooting," Levine said in an interview. But the defense attorney declined to specify where Drescher was or how soon he left town before the May 22, 1986, slaying.

Those surprises, he said, will be unveiled as the trial unfolds.

Deputy Dist. Atty. Sterling Norris downplayed the defense evidence and characterized the claims of wrongful immunity as a "common defense strategy."

"We feel very confident from our evidence that Breier is not the killer," Norris said. "We had a substantial case on Drescher before we ever arrived at the point of granting immunity to Breier. Breier was just a piece of the puzzle."

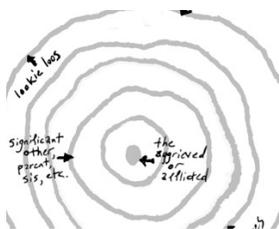
Norris said one key witness against Drescher will be a former West Virginia steelworker named Randall Gorby, who testified at length under immunity during a 1989 preliminary hearing and later committed suicide.

Gorby, whose earlier testimony will be read to the jury, was not a Hare Krishna but was closely associated with the temple in West Virginia. Defense attorneys, citing his suicide, questioned Gorby's reliability and called him an "emotional and psychiatric misfit in this world."

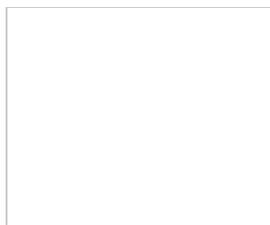
Gorby testified that he had known Drescher since 1983. Drescher, once a spiritual master at the West Virginia temple--his Krishna name was Tirtha Swami--had called Gorby in 1986 to ask a favor: Would he travel to a small motel near his home in Ohio to help find Bryant? After doing so, Gorby was met at the motel by Drescher and another Krishna.



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