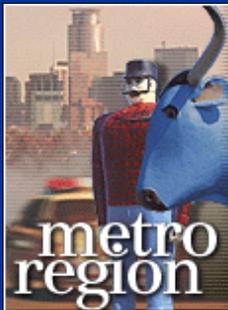


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Woman charged in Government Center slaying

David Chanen, Star Tribune

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Susan Berkovitz went to a gun show this summer and bought a .38-caliber Smith & Wesson revolver that was about 100 years old. Then she told investigators she went target shooting.

She waited Monday morning at the Hennepin County Government Center for her cousin Shelley Joseph-Kordell and attorney Richard Hendrickson to arrive for a hearing.

They were two people whom she obsessively resented, authorities said. They were the reason she had no money or a place to call her own, pushing her to the brink, Berkovitz voluntarily told police after her arrest.

"Shelley brought on her own death," Berkovitz told police.

Berkovitz, 52, was charged Wednesday with premeditated first-degree murder after she shot Joseph-Kordell, of Minnetonka, four times in a restroom near the 17th-floor courtroom to deal with the latest of dozens of filings related to the family's estate.

Berkovitz also was charged with the attempted first-degree murder of Hendrickson, of Crystal. Berkovitz said she shot him because he stole money from her relatives.

"My daughter felt so sorry for her, even though she had given her such a hard time over the last few years," said Geri Joseph, Joseph-Kordell's mother. "I can't say anything cruel about Susie. But she saw everything through a strange lens."



Susan Berkovitz

County Attorney Amy Klobuchar stressed there is no evidence to substantiate the truth of Berkovitz's accusations, but she said the statements indicate Berkovitz's motive and that the crime was planned.

Investigators haven't verified whether she actually bought the weapon at a gun show. Where the gun came from will be difficult to trace because serial numbers weren't required when it was presumably manufactured, between

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1890 and 1910.

"All the fault belongs to Susan," said Joel Spivak, an attorney representing the Berkovitz family. He is not representing Susan Berkovitz. "Susan never really wanted to work. She blamed all of her problems on everybody else."

Hendrickson, 53, was shot in the neck at close range. His siblings held a news conference Wednesday at the Hennepin County Medical Center to discuss his recovery. They spoke little about Berkovitz, a woman whom they knew of, but whose name they hadn't known before Monday.

"We called her the crazy lady because she would harass him quite a bit," said Lori Wachter, Hendrickson's sister.

For several years, Berkovitz seemed to care only about becoming conservator of the modest estate of her father, Hyman Berkovitz -- a job that had been handled by Joseph-Kordell, relatives said. Berkovitz also had been contesting her father's will in Los Angeles, Spivak said. She had come to a half-dozen court proceedings since last summer, but she couldn't understand that she wasn't going to get one thin dime, he said.

"I believe her legal recourse in Minneapolis and Los Angeles over these matters was coming to an end, and it might have pushed her over the edge," Spivak said.

Berkovitz's anger toward Joseph-Kordell had intensified to a point at which the family was considering hiring a private investigator for a possible commitment proceeding. Joseph-Kordell and Hendrickson had requested that a security officer escort them Monday to the 17th floor of the government center's administrative tower for a hearing about Berkovitz's denial for a restraining order against them.

Joseph-Kordell had the officer bring her to a bathroom moments before Berkovitz shot Hendrickson in a reception area. The unarmed security officer saw Berkovitz coming toward the bathroom, gun in hand, and went into a nearby conference room filled with people and shut the door to protect them, authorities said.

The officer saw Berkovitz go into the bathroom, where Joseph-Kordell was killed. A county sheriff's deputy and Minneapolis police officer arrested Berkovitz after she walked across a bridge over an atrium to the government center's court tower.

"If she had escaped the area, it could have been a different event," said Sheriff Pat McGowan.

Joseph-Kordell, 56, who was president of Estates in Transition, had been nervous doing court business at the government center because it didn't have metal detectors. Her husband, Woody Grandstaff, said he even thought Berkovitz plotted to get her to that location because the courthouse in Ramsey County did have detectors.

"She needed a reason to draw us. Now she sat there and she plotted to drag

us into Hennepin County court," he said.

McGowan said he is a strong advocate of safety in public buildings, but that has to be balanced with accessibility. The government center is a particularly difficult building because of its several dozen entrances, he said.

"More security would come with a high price tag, and I can't make that decision unilaterally," he said. "This wasn't a random shooting, and nobody had been shot since the building opened in 1975. But you could never guarantee anybody's safety."

As with every first-degree murder charge, the case will be presented to a grand jury, Klobuchar said. Investigators had interviewed 62 people, including 12 witnesses on the 17th floor, she said. The past days have been difficult, she said, but she thanked the hundreds of county workers who continued to do their jobs through it all.

If Berkovitz bought her gun from a gun show, the act wasn't illegal. There are no restrictions of the sale of a gun between two individuals, except that it can't be sold to somebody from another state or a person who the seller knows is a felon, said Sherry Duval, spokeswoman for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. No registration of the gun's transfer is required, she said.

If a licensed gun dealer sold her the gun, Berkovitz would have been required to fill out paperwork with her name and address and note whether she was prohibited from buying a gun. Those restrictions include people with felonies or a court ruling of mental defect. Berkovitz had neither, authorities said.

The business that had sold the gun could be closed, she said. Although the gun is nearly 100 years old, she said it could still be useable if cared for properly.

Berkovitz is being held at the county jail in lieu of \$2 million bail. She isn't under a suicide watch, but she is under some additional observation.

Minneapolis attorney Joe Friedberg, who has met with Berkovitz in jail, said he might go to court with her Thursday to be sure she has an attorney. At that time, she will be assigned a public defender and he will not represent her beyond that appearance, he said.

Jim Kamin, first assistant public defender for the county, explained how that process works.

A defendant is interviewed by court services, and the information is reported to the judge at the defendant's first appearance. The judge then determines whether the person qualifies for a public defender, and the public defender's office chooses an attorney for the case.

Although relatives had concerns about Berkovitz's state of mind, she was never found to be mentally ill. An insanity defense rarely succeeds.

Joseph-Kordell's mother said Wednesday that it was sad that Berkovitz

never had the kind of psychiatric attention she needed.

"If she wasn't mentally ill, her mind wasn't working the way what we consider the way a normal mind would work," she said. "Her 90-year-old mother has to deal with this. My heart goes out to her family. It's a waste of two lives."

Friedberg represented June Mikulanec in 1978 for stabbing a woman more than 90 times, and she was found not guilty by reason of mental illness. He said jurors think of their own personal safety and mistakenly think a person found not guilty by reason of mental illness will walk free.

"They can spend more time committed than if they had served a prison term," he said.

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