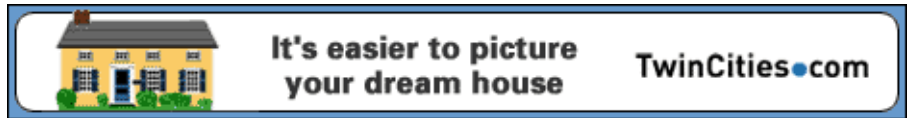


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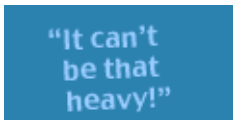
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Thursday, Oct 02, 2003

PIONEER PRESS

Posted on Thu, Oct.
02, 2003

Court shooting brings charges

BY AMY MAYRON
Pioneer Press

A St. Paul woman charged with **shooting** her cousin and her cousin's lawyer outside a Hennepin County courtroom used a turn-of-the-century five-shot **revolver that she bought at a gun show**, authorities said Wednesday.

Prosecutors charged Susan Rae Berkovitz, 52, with first-degree premeditated murder and first-degree attempted murder. Bail was set at \$2 million.

Berkovitz took a .38-caliber Smith & Wesson revolver manufactured sometime between 1880 and 1910 to the 17th floor of the Hennepin County Government Center on Monday morning, Sheriff Patrick McGowan said. She was seeking a restraining order against her cousin, Shelley Joseph-Kordell, 56, and Joseph-Kordell's attorney, Richard Hendrickson, 53, after a long-running legal dispute involving the Berkovitz family estate.

Hendrickson was waiting in a reception area outside a courtroom while Joseph-Kordell went to the restroom nearby when Berkovitz fired once at the lawyer from Crystal and then casually walked down the hall to the bathroom, where she fired four times at Joseph-Kordell, killing the Minnetonka resident, according to the charges.

Before she died, Joseph-Kordell told emergency workers that it was Berkovitz who shot her, the charges allege.

An unarmed security officer accompanied Joseph-Kordell to the bathroom and was waiting outside the door when he saw Berkovitz come toward him with the gun by her side, McGowan said.

When the guard saw the armed woman, he immediately turned toward some eight employees who were in the area and yelled at them to get down and move out of the area as quickly as possible, said his supervisor, Roberta Haight, who would not name the guard. The guard did not know that Berkovitz was going into the bathroom, so he tried to protect as many people in the area as he could, Haight said.

"In our training, it's not our expectation for an unarmed security officer to tackle an armed suspect," she said. "All he knew was that if there's any way you can help save a life, that's what you should do. In my estimation, he (may) have saved more lives by doing exactly what he did."

A sheriff's deputy and a Minneapolis police officer arrested Berkovitz shortly after she left the scene and walked across an atrium bridge linking the government center's twin towers. The gun was found inside or near the bathroom, where Berkovitz said she dropped it after the shooting, according to the charges.

Berkovitz told a sheriff's deputy that she went to a gun show this summer — though McGowan said he didn't know where — and bought the revolver and then went target shooting at a range to learn how to use it. She did not have a permit to carry a handgun nor had she applied for one in either Hennepin or Ramsey counties, authorities said. The U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives is trying to trace the gun's origins, but it may be difficult because of its age and the fact that it didn't have a serial number at the time it was made.

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Susan Berkovitz

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Berkovitz ranted to arresting officers that she was upset with the two victims because they had stolen all of her money from her father's estate, for which Joseph-Kordell was the executor. She also said that they were extorting money from the estate, and because she had no money, she was forced to live in a shelter. She said she was fed up, the charges allege. She also said she blamed Joseph-Kordell for her situation and that her cousin "brought it on herself," the documents stated.

"We have no evidence to substantiate the truth of the statements she made against the victims," said Hennepin County Attorney Amy Klobuchar. "They are in the complaint only as evidence of premeditation."

Berkovitz has a long history of quarreling with nearly everyone she encounters. She became obsessed with the family dispute stemming from her attempts to be named conservator of her father's modest \$170,000 estate. Ramsey County severely limited her access to the courts there after she filed numerous frivolous documents and threw tantrums in the courthouse.

She was banned from donating blood because of conflicts with American Red Cross staff. She was temporarily banned from St. Paul libraries after "verbally abusing the staff," library officials said.

Several attorneys dropped her as a client. Yet no one suspected she would turn her mostly verbally abusive behavior into physical violence.

Since her arrest, jail workers say she has been cooperative and compliant. She was given a medical evaluation at the time she was booked and is currently housed with the general population, said sheriff's office spokeswoman Roseann Campagnoli. She is not on suicide watch, McGowan said.

Medical evaluators at the jail would have likely asked Berkovitz some questions to establish her mental state. If it appeared that she was showing signs of severe mental illness or crisis, the jail would have transferred her to Hennepin County Medical Center, where there is a secure psychiatric ward.

Berkovitz is scheduled for an initial court appearance at 1:30 p.m. today. It is a perfunctory hearing, at which a judge will determine whether she has a lawyer or if she qualifies for a public defender. A defense attorney also could argue for a reduced bail. Within two weeks, prosecutors will present the case to a Hennepin County grand jury for an indictment, required by state law for a first-degree murder charge, which carries a mandatory life sentence upon conviction.

At any point in the judicial process, a defense attorney or prosecutor could ask for, or a judge could issue, an order requiring Berkovitz to go through a psychiatric evaluation to determine whether she is competent to stand trial. A defense attorney also could ask for such an order if planning to use mental illness as a criminal defense.

Minneapolis defense attorney Joe Friedberg said Berkovitz called him about possible representation. Friedberg met with her in jail, but he will not be her lawyer, he said. She will likely be assigned a public defender, he added.

David Hawley and Lisa Donovan contributed to this report. Amy Mayron, who covers Minneapolis public safety, can be reached at amayron@pioneerpress.com or 612-338-6872.



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