

Arrest shrinks hatemonger down to size

Chicago Tribune - January 9, 2003

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Seconds before he was arrested by FBI agents Wednesday on charges of soliciting the murder of a federal judge, I talked to the hater, Matthew Hale .

I interviewed him in the lobby of the federal building about his hatred.

Normally, I wouldn't give Hale any space in my column. His anti-Semitic ravings, his prejudice against minorities, they don't need a platform.

But Hale is dangerous. He already has blood on his hands. According to a federal indictment, he wanted U.S. District Judge Joan Humphrey Lefkow's blood too.

And I was there when he was about to be arrested and charged.

He's appalled that Lefkow is married to a Jew. And he doesn't think much of her grandchildren.

"They're half-breeds," he told me, calmly. "And she's married to a Jew."

In the lobby, Hale's white followers stood obediently behind him in their white berets, black shirts and leather, bright eyes on their leader.

If they had taken their eyes off him for a second, they might have noticed something. Dozens of white FBI agents were eyeing them, some in suits, others in hats and jackets, hard men lounging, pretending indifference, posing as courthouse workers, ready to pounce.

In a few moments, they would jump him and push him into a waiting elevator, while escorting his white beret "security forces" out onto Dearborn Street.

All the haters had to do was look around to see the federal eyes on them. But hatred requires concentration, and they were too busy concentrating on a federal judge.

"She has declared war upon our church," said Hale as we stood in the lobby. "She's a Jew or a Jewish sympathizer, and she's succumbed to Zionist pressure.

"She's married to a Jew," he said, almost casually, as if he were ordering a grilled cheese sandwich. "I said she's married to a Jew. She has three half-black grandchildren. There are many such things in her background. And we're for the white race."

As he spoke, I hoped he'd soon experience multicultural diversity up close and personal in the federal pen.

Hale is the leader of a national hate movement that inspired a shooting spree here in 1999, in which one of his disciples, Benjamin Smith, killed two people, including former Northwestern University basketball coach Ricky Byrdsong.

Nine others were shot before Smith killed himself.

On Wednesday, Hale wasn't a charismatic anything.

He seemed more like a nerdy hardware store clerk from some raw, cold place, a place of Quonset huts, grain elevators, of train tracks downtown, women edging away from him on the street.

In his long, black leather coat, a red tie on a white shirt and insignia, he was dressed in the style of the little Austrian paperhanger.

You're wearing Nazi-style clothes, I told him. He sneered.

"You don't understand," he said, then went on with his spiel. "Our country is being turned into a third-world hellhole."

Lefkow is the judge in a civil case involving Hale and his organization, the World Church of the Creator. Another religious organization with a similar name has filed a copyright suit.

A court had ordered Hale's group to cease using the name, and to turn over all books and pamphlets bearing the name.

"These are our bibles," Hale said. "I'm not going to turn over our bibles to be burned. It's unconstitutional. It's illegal."

It's also illegal to solicit a murder, I'm told. And those aren't Bibles the judge is asking for.

I didn't need to hear any more. And as Hale passed through the metal detectors, on the way to the elevator banks leading to the courtroom, the anti-terrorist squad closed in.

They followed behind as he turned the corner, with more federal agents at every elevator. He made a small sound. The elevator doors closed. He was gone.

If convicted, Hale could receive a 30-year prison sentence. He said he was not guilty.

"It's a crime when you try to convince someone to kill someone and you mean it," said U. S. Atty. Patrick Fitzgerald. "He'll have a trial, and we'll go from there."

Richard S. Hirschhaut, of the Anti-Defamation League, said Hale had finally trapped himself.

"He's one of the worst," said Hirschhaut. "He's a terrorist. And he has blood on his hands, because he inspired the terror of Benjamin Smith in 1999, those 40 hours of violence, with two people dead and others wounded. He's been so skillful, so clever. But now, he's been caught."

Later, Hale was brought into another courtroom to give his plea. His followers were there, dozens of them. They gave him a Hitler-style salute. He gave a not-guilty plea.

"It's a Roman salute," said a young follower in the hallway afterward.

"It's an ancient salute, a Roman salute," he said.

I know what it is, I said.

He smiled.

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Edition: North Sports Final

Section: News

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Index Terms: CHICAGO ; FEDERAL ; COURT ; ARREST ; ATTEMPT ;  
MURDER ; OFFICIAL ; GROUP CULT ; INDICT

Record Number: CTR0301090364

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