

JUDGE'S KIN ARE SLAIN - MOTHER, HUSBAND SHOT POLICE PROBE SUPREMACIST LINK

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CHICAGO - A federal judge who was once targeted for assassination by a white supremacist returned to her North Side home Monday night to find her husband and mother murdered in the basement, each shot with a .22-caliber bullet in the forehead.

The execution-style killings occurred a month before white supremacist Matthew Hale is scheduled to be sentenced for soliciting the murder of US District Judge Joan H. Lefkow.

At a news conference yesterday, police were guarded with details and said the investigation into the slayings of attorney Michael Lefkow, 64, and his mother-in-law, Donna Humphrey, 89, who was visiting from Colorado, was not limited to white supremacist groups.

"There's much speculation about possible links between these crimes and the possible involvement of hate groups. This is but one facet of our investigation," said James Malloy, the chief of detectives for the Chicago police. "It would be far too early to draw any definitive links. The case is too new."

But a detective familiar with the investigation, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said police, the FBI, and the US Marshal's Office have formed a task force of at least 26 investigators and were pursuing the white supremacist link as their strongest lead.

The Cook County medical examiner's office listed the cause of death for each as multiple gunshot wounds, but the detective said both victims were shot once in the forehead with a .22-caliber gun. Lefkow found their bodies in a basement office of her Edgewater home when she returned home from her office at the Dirksen Federal Building.

Hale, the founder and self-proclaimed "pontifex maximus" ("supreme pontiff") of a white supremacist group he called World Church of the Creator, was arrested in January 2003 and charged with soliciting Lefkow's murder. A month before, she had held him in contempt for continuing to call his group by that name after an appellate court had ruled that such a use was a trademark infringement.

At the time, Hale issued a release in which he said Lefkow was committing "unbridled terrorism" against his group and suggested that Lefkow was a "probable Jew or married to a Jew." The Lefkows are Episcopalian, and Michael Lefkow was an official with the Chicago diocese of the Episcopal Church.

US Marshals began protecting Lefkow after Hale was arrested in January 2003. But the protection did not last long.

US Marshal's Service spokeswoman Shannon Metzger said the protection lasted only a few weeks after it was "deemed not viable." Chicago police, however, stepped up their patrols around the Lefkow home; the patrols continued until Hale was found guilty in April 2004. Security cameras were also installed at the home.

Heightening the concern, Lefkow's address was circulated on the Internet following Hale's arrest on the solicitation charge.

The Associated Press reported yesterday that articles about the killings on some supremacist sites were accompanied by the phrase "RAHOWA," which stands for racial holy war.

Hale is being held pending sentencing next month.

"This is a tragic case, and we are committed to getting to the bottom of what happened in that home," said Hiram Grau, Chicago police deputy superintendent for investigative services.

The source close to the investigation said two .22-caliber shell casings were found in the basement.

"They were sloppy," the source said. The killer or killers apparently entered by removing a screen and breaking a window, according to the source, who added that nothing appeared to be missing from the home and that the assailants apparently left through a side door.

An attorney familiar with the case said there was blood on a stairway and possible fingerprint evidence left behind.

The casings are among the evidence being analyzed by technicians in Chicago and in Washington, D.C. "We have a lot of physical evidence from the scene," said Malloy, who would not elaborate.

The bodies of Humphrey and Michael Lefkow were found about 5:30 p.m. Monday. It was not clear when the judge's husband and mother were killed, although Malloy said Humphrey answered a phone call from a granddaughter at 10:30 a.m. One of the Lefkows' daughters returned home around 4 p.m. to pick up a gym bag. The teenager did not see her father or grandmother, and police said they believe the victims were killed before she arrived home.

Yesterday, police roped off the street, not allowing reporters near the gray, wood-sided home. A lone condolence card was posted on a nearby wood fence, left by a neighbor. Hale's attorney during the solicitation trial, Thomas Anthony Durkin, refused to comment yesterday, saying Hale who passed the bar but was denied a license because of his white power beliefs represents himself.

Reached by phone last night, Hale's father, former police officer Russell H. Hale, 71, scoffed at any suggestion that his son could be involved in the killings.

"He hasn't seen the light of day for over two years" the elder Hale said. "He's in solitary confinement and doesn't see anybody besides prison guards and his mother and father twice a month." Matthew Hale ran his church out of his parent's house in East Peoria, Ill.

Police would not disclose what other leads they were pursuing, but a Chicago police source said FBI agents were reviewing cases where Lefkow convicted a defendant going back at least a year. In those cases, the FBI was interviewing defendants, victims, witnesses, and informants, the source said. A lawyer familiar with the case said investigators were looking into "a Mexican drug case," among others.

Poring over the cases could prove daunting.

"She handled literally thousands of cases in US District Court and Bankruptcy Court," said Daniel J. Lehmann, spokesman for the US District Court's Northern District of Illinois.

Lefkow was hired as a US magistrate in 1982, and worked in both District Court and Bankruptcy Court until 2000, when she was appointed District Court judge by President Clinton.

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Page: A1

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