

Shadowed by Threats, Judge Finds New Horror

New York Times, The (NY) - March 2, 2005

Author: JODI WILGOREN ; David Bernstein and Gretchen Ruethling contributed reporting from Chicago for this article, Mindy Sink from Denver and David Johnston from Washington.

Abstract: Federal Judge Joan Humphrey Lefkow, who has been target of white supremacist threats almost since appointment in 2000, finds husband Michael F Lefkow and 89-year-old mother, Donna Humphrey, shot to death in their Chicago home; authorities investigate possible link to Matthew Hale , white supremacist awaiting sentencing for soliciting her assassination; photos; hate groups celebrate killings on Internet; judge became target when she got case involving Oregon group's lawsuit to block Hale from using its trademarked name, Church of the Creator; she actually ruled in Hale's favor but was overruled on appeal (M)

For Joan Humphrey Lefkow, the nightmare began shortly after her appointment as a federal judge in 2000, when an Oregon group's lawsuit to block white supremacists from using a name it had trademarked, World Church of the Creator, landed in her lap.

Soon, Judge Lefkow found her home address and family photographs posted along with violent threats on hate-filled Web sites. Last April, one of the Aryan movement's most notorious leaders was convicted of plotting her murder.

On Tuesday, Judge Lefkow was under armed federal guard in an undisclosed place, mourning the deaths of Michael F. Lefkow, her husband of 30 years, and Donna Humphrey, her 89-year-old mother, whom she found dead of gunshots to the head in their basement the evening before.

"I think she's very upset with herself, maybe, for being a judge and putting her family in this danger," said Laura Lefkow, 20, the third of the judge's five daughters, "but there's no way she should have known."

Local and federal law enforcement officials said on Tuesday they were investigating possible connections between the double killing and Matthew Hale , the white supremacist now in federal prison awaiting sentencing for soliciting Judge Lefkow's assassination, or his many sympathizers. Federal officials in Washington said agents were reviewing Judge Lefkow's caseload in search of suspects, with the main thrust on the hate groups that had focused on her before.

Already, some white supremacists were celebrating the killings on the Internet, while others spun conspiracy theories that the crime had been committed by Mr. Hale's enemies to poison the atmosphere before his sentencing next month. Experts who have spent years tracking Mr. Hale's organization, now called Creativity, also pointed to the sentencing, recalling that one of his acolytes, Benjamin Smith, went on a shooting spree in 1999 after Mr. Hale, who had passed the Illinois bar exam, was denied a license to practice law.

"We saw what happened the last time Matt Hale got slapped in the face by the system; the price of that was two dead and nine severely wounded," said Mark Potok, director of intelligence for the Southern Poverty Law Center, which tracks hate groups. "Now Matt Hale is about to be sentenced, very probably, to most of his natural life to federal prison. It's very possible that a Hale follower or sympathizer has decided to fight back."

Billy Roper, a friend of Mr. Hale who leads a group called White Revolution, disavowed the violence but offered a different parallel: the F.B.I.'s 1992 confrontation

in Ruby Ridge, Idaho, with the white separatist Randall C. Weaver, whose wife and 14-year-old son wound up dead.

"We can stand alongside the federal law enforcement community in saying just as they felt a deep regret and sadness over the death of Randy Weaver's family, so we also feel a deep sense of regret and sadness over the death of Judge Lefkow's family," Mr. Roper said. "If it was the case that someone was misguided and thought that they were helping Matt Hale, then it would be similar in that other people had suffered for one person's mistake."

Mr. Hale, who faces up to 40 years in prison, has been held for two years in the Metropolitan Correctional Center here under special administrative measures reserved for terrorists that limit contact with the outside world.

Federal officials refused to discuss the restrictions, but Mr. Hale's mother, Evelyn Hutcheson, said that she and his father were the only people with whom he was allowed contact and that they were limited to 15-minute phone calls each Thursday morning and hourlong visits twice a month.

"He had nothing to do with what went on last night," Ms. Hutcheson said in a telephone interview Tuesday from her home in East Peoria, Ill. "My son is sitting in a hole where he's not allowed to even speak loud enough to be audible."

"Common sense would tell you, if he were into having somebody kill somebody -- which he is not -- would he have somebody go kill the judge's family just before he's sentenced?" she added. "Somebody has done this to make him get an enhanced sentence."

The authorities warned that it was too soon to fix on any one theory of the crime, though they did not offer other possible accounts or motives.

James Molloy, the Chicago Police Department's chief of detectives, said the two people were killed between 10:30 a.m., when Ms. Humphrey answered a telephone call from one of her granddaughters, and 5:30 p.m. when the judge returned home. At 4 p.m., the Lefkows' youngest daughter, Margaret, 16, went home to get her gym bag and left without seeing anyone, Chief Molloy said.

"There is much speculation about possible links between this crime and the possible involvement of hate groups," he said at a news conference. "This is but one facet of our investigation. We are looking in many, many directions."

Beth Sycamore, who lives three houses from the Lefkows, said the couple strolled the neighborhood holding hands and took the El train, even with the death threats.

"She wasn't afraid," Ms. Sycamore said of the judge. "They just didn't want it to affect their lives."

Shannon Metzger, a spokeswoman for the United States Marshals Service, said that Judge Lefkow had a special protective detail for "a couple of weeks" last year but that it was disbanded when the threats against her were deemed "not viable." Mr. Molloy said the Chicago police had also stopped sending cars to her home for extra patrols, and Laura Lefkow said the authorities had long ago removed the security cameras they had installed in their home.

"I guess because the F.B.I. felt it seemed like there was no danger," said Ms. Lefkow, a sophomore at Pomona College in Southern California.

On Monday night, federal marshals met Ms. Lefkow's plane from Los Angeles, and they stood guard Tuesday as the family planned Saturday funerals for Mrs. Humphrey and Mr. Lefkow, a lawyer who was a leader in the Episcopal Church.

Mr. Lefkow, who ran unsuccessfully for Cook County judge in 2002 and 2004, argued two cases before the United States Supreme Court and worked for the Legal Aid Society and the United States Postal Service before starting a private practice about 20 years ago. He spent every Sunday at St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Evanston, and since 1992 had been a lay member of the governing committee of the Chicago Diocese of the Episcopal Church.

Mr. Lefkow met his future wife in the library of Wheaton College, where she was an undergraduate. "She was doing a paper on Indonesia, and he was doing a paper on Indonesia, and she had all his books," Laura Lefkow recounted of her parents' first encounter. "He used to say he was rich in daughters and not much else," she laughed. "He was just an optimist about everything, to the point where it was like, 'Oh, my gosh, Dad, come on,' and he would be like, 'It'll be fine,' and it was. It was always fine."

Mrs. Humphrey, who lived in a town house in Denver, had been staying with the judge's family since before Christmas as she recovered from a kidney infection. Neighbors in Denver said she played solitaire and Scrabble on a computer and frequently cooked large meals for friends. She hand-stitched quilts for each of her 23 descendants.

Judge Lefkow, a magistrate judge since 1982, was named to the United States District Court by President Bill Clinton. In the case she handled involving Mr. Hale's church, she initially ruled in favor of Mr. Hale, dismissing the trademark case in 2002.

After an appeals court reversed her decision, though, Judge Lefkow had little choice but to order Mr. Hale to remove the World Church name from his Web sites and printed material or face fines of \$1,000 a day.

She was immediately vilified. Hal Turner, an "underground" radio personality who broadcasts on a shortwave signal, said on his show that Judge Lefkow was "worthy of being killed," adding that "it wouldn't be legal, but in my opinion it wouldn't be wrong."

Mr. Hale, who called himself pontifex maximus of the church that at one point claimed 30,000 members, was arrested in January 2003, after an F.B.I. informant infiltrated the group to become his security chief.

The informant, Anthony Evola, provided an e-mail message in which Mr. Hale sought Judge Lefkow's home address and a tape recording of their discussing her fate. "We going to exterminate the rat?" Mr. Evola asked. Mr. Hale said that he preferred to "fight within the law" but that "if you wish to, ah, do anything yourself, you can, you know?"

When Mr. Evola said, "Consider it done," Mr. Hale responded, "Good."

Mr. Potok of the Southern Poverty Law Center said that after Mr. Hale's arrest his group foundered, shrinking from a high in the 1990's of 88 chapters to 5 in 2003. But he said it jumped to at least 16 chapters last year and remains one of the nation's most violent groups.

Sympathizers abound. "Everyone associated with the Matt Hale trial has deserved assassination for a long time," read an Internet essay posted Tuesday by Bill White, editor of The Libertarian Socialist News. "I don't feel bad that Judge Lefkow's family was murdered today. In fact, when I heard the story, I laughed."

A Case's History

MAY 2000 -- A church based in Oregon files suit to block Matthew Hale from using the term "Church of the Creator." The Oregon group had registered the term as a trademark and said that the similar names left the impression that their church endorsed Mr. Hale's racist messages. Federal District Judge Joan Humphrey Lefkow ruled in favor of Mr. Hale, leader of World Church of the Creator.

AUGUST 2002 -- Judge Lefkow's ruling is overturned on appeal.

NOVEMBER 2002 -- Judge Lefkow orders Mr. Hale's group to stop using the name on the Internet and to destroy any printed materials that use the name. Mr. Hale later sues Judge Lefkow, claiming that her order violated the Constitution by requiring the destruction of the group's Bibles.

JANUARY 2003 -- Mr. Hale is arrested on charges that he solicited the murder of Judge Lefkow.

APRIL 2004 -- Mr. Hale is found guilty of one count of soliciting the murder of a federal judge and three counts of obstruction of justice.

Caption: Photos: Investigators examined the home of Judge Joan Humphrey Lefkow of federal court after two murders there. (Photo by Scott Olson/Getty Images)(pg. A1); Judge Joan Humphrey Lefkow of Federal District Court had been dealing with death threats. (Photo by Phil Vasquez/Chicago Tribune); Matthew Hale , shown with a supporter, was convicted last year of soliciting Judge Lefkow's murder. (Photo by Seth Perlman/Associated Press)(pg. A14)

Edition: Late Edition - Final

Section: National Desk

Page: 1

Page Column: 02

Page Subsection: A

Index Terms: Chronology; World Church of the Creator; Murders and Attempted Murders; Courts; Judges; Assassinations and Attempted Assassinations; Fringe Groups and Movements; Threats and Threatening Messages

Location(s): Chicago (Ill)

Personal Name(s): Lefkow, Joan Humphrey (Judge)Lefkow, Michael FHumphrey, DonnaHale, MatthewWilgoren, Jodi

Dateline: CHICAGO, March 1

Record Number: 2005-03-02-452440

Copyright (c) 2005 The New York Times Company