

Police: DNA matches - Top cop says evidence, suicide notes solve Lefkow slayings - Letters describe killings, hit list

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A day after Bart Ross shot himself during a traffic stop outside Milwaukee, police said DNA tests had definitively tied him to the murders of U.S. District Judge Joan Lefkow's husband and mother.

Ross, an out-of-work electrician from Chicago with a long history of ranting against judges and lawyers, is believed to have shot Lefkow's relatives in a failed attempt to murder her, police said.

Investigators also discovered indications that Ross, disfigured by cancer of the jaw and bitter over legal defeats, may have been hunting down doctors and other judges he had dealt with.

"Results from DNA analysis by the state crime lab and the totality of the information gathered during this investigation now lead us to conclude that Ross alone is responsible for these homicides," Chicago Police Supt. Philip Cline said Thursday night.

The DNA that was found on a cigarette butt in the sink of Lefkow's home was matched late Thursday to samples taken from Ross' body, after the 57-year-old committed suicide in his van on a residential street in West Allis, Wis.

He had been living in the van since being evicted from his home two weeks before the killings.

The events that unfolded Wednesday night in the Milwaukee suburb abruptly changed the course of an investigation that had been mostly focused on white supremacist groups.

Ross is not believed to have belonged to any hate groups, or have any connection to jailed white supremacist Matthew Hale, who is in jail awaiting sentencing for soliciting Judge Lefkow's murder.

Ross, too, had courtroom conflict with Lefkow. Lawyers said he had appeared in state and federal courts in Chicago for more than a decade trying to get a medical malpractice case heard.

Usually appearing without a lawyer, he ranted about judges acting like "Nazis" and accused them of treason for keeping his case from proceeding.

Police said they found a suicide note in Ross' van in which he confessed to the killings and included a "hit list" of others he was targeting. A note similar to the one discovered in the van was sent to WMAQ-TV. That note spelled out in chilling detail how Ross had broken into Lefkow's home and lain in wait for the judge to come home.

The message said he planned to "get" Lefkow, who dismissed his medical malpractice lawsuit last year, "and then others, whoever I could get."

"Judge Lefkow was No. 1 to kill because she finished me off and deprived me to live my life through outrageous abuse of judicial power and decimation (sic) of the judicial office," stated the note sent to NBC5. "Judge Lefkow, to her neighbors, is a church going `angel.' To me, Judge Lefkow is a Nazi-style criminal and terrorist."

Judge Lefkow, who has been under guard since the Feb. 28 slayings, left Chicago Thursday for her mother's funeral in Denver. "I guess on one level I'm relieved that it didn't have anything to do with the white supremacy movement, because I feel my children are going to be safer," Lefkow told The New York Times. "It's heartbreaking that my husband and mother had to die over something like this."

With the case solved, officials can now say with grim certainty that the killings are the first in the U.S. where a judge's family members were killed in retaliation for the judge's rulings.

The note Ross sent to WMAQ said he shot Michael Lefkow using a gun with a homemade silencer after the judge's husband happened upon him in the basement's utility room. He shot the judge's mother, Donna Grace Humphrey, 89, after she called down for her son-in-law at least an hour later.

The note, signed by Ross, said he then left the Lefkows' house at about 1:15 p.m. Feb. 28 and approached the suburban Chicago home of Dr. Henry Briele, whom Ross had sued in his malpractice claim. He said he also approached the Glencoe home of another judge but did not write what happened at those two houses.

Police said neither of the men mentioned in the letter were harmed. All people on the list have been offered law enforcement protection, officials said.

Ross might also have been scoping out federal appeals Judge John L. Coffey of Milwaukee, who had ruled against Ross in 2002.

Milwaukee municipal records show Ross was issued a parking ticket at around 2 p.m. Wednesday about five blocks from the courthouse where Coffey works.

When police attempted to pull him over for a routine traffic stop about three hours later in a residential neighborhood in nearby West Allis, Ross pulled out a gun and shot himself in the head.

West Allis Officer Ricky Orlowski Jr. said Ross pulled over but did not roll down his window.

"I thought maybe he hadn't seen me right away," Orlowski said. "All of the sudden the gunshot came out. I felt the concussion. Glass hit me in the face. I was like, `That guy shot at me.'"

It wasn't until about 9:40 p.m. that police realized through the suicide note that Ross might be connected to the Lefkow case, and called Milwaukee members of the Great Lakes Regional Fugitive Task Force.

The task force, led by the U.S. Marshals Service, then notified their counterparts in Chicago.

Members of a task force investigating the Lefkow murders arrived in West Allis about an hour later.

Besides the suicide note, police found hundreds of rounds of .22-caliber shells in three boxes, but no .22-caliber gun. Investigators say Ross shot himself with a 9 mm pistol.

Ballistics tests matched a spent shell casing found at Ross' Chicago home to casings recovered at the murder scene in the basement of the Lefkow home, sources said. A spokesman for the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives said also that .22-caliber rounds in Ross' van matched the make and type of shell casings found at the murder scene.

Thomas Ahern, an ATF spokesman, said Ross bought the 9 mm gun at a Bensenville gun shop in 1993. He said the ATF is "pursuing the possibility" that Ross bought a second gun.

ATF agents Thursday night were investigating a background check conducted on Ross at a Niles gun shop, but had not yet found records proving he bought the second gun.

Cline said the two notes Ross apparently wrote contain details about the slayings that were unknown to the general public. Most specifically, Ross named the locations where the victims were shot in the house.

The police superintendent also said Ross matched the description from a witness who saw a man leaving the Lefkow home the afternoon of the killings. Sources also said investigators recovered a stocking cap and coveralls from Ross' van--items similar to those in the sketch of the man a witness saw.

Cline said Ross' name was on a list of cases Judge Lefkow had heard and was scheduled to be interviewed by the task force investigating the killings. He did not say when that interview would have occurred.

Friends and neighbors described Ross as a loner who was obsessed with his medical malpractice lawsuit. In the lawsuit, he claimed that doctors at the University of Illinois Hospitals had mistreated him.

Records show Ross was diagnosed with the cancer in 1992 and underwent aggressive therapy. As a result, he lost several teeth and most of his lower jaw.

"As the years went on, I saw the rhetoric he was using and the paranoid fantasy," said Don Rose, a political consultant who had hired Ross to do electrical work on his home, then befriended him.

"He felt everybody on Earth was a part of the conspiracy," Rose said. "He compared the system in Nazi concentration camps to the legal system, doctors and lawyers."

Barry Bollinger, an attorney who represented doctors sued by Ross, said Ross routinely made threats against judges and others involved in the case, but he thought no harm would come of it.

"This happens all the time," Bollinger said. "I've got to be blunt, I didn't think Bart Ross seemed more likely to carry out a threat than others who I've seen make them."

Bollinger said Ross tried for years to find a lawyer to represent him, but no one would take the case.

"I don't know how to describe him other than a man who was obsessed with this case," Bollinger said. "He wouldn't accept that he was treated properly and they cured him of cancer."

Ross, a Polish immigrant who had changed his name from Bartilomiej Ciszewski, eventually fell heavily into debt and lost his house. Over the past decade, he lost repeatedly in court, but continued to push his lawsuit.

Last September, Judge Lefkow dismissed Ross' case, saying Ross had "failed to state a claim" on which she could rule.

Lefkow called Ross' claims that judges were conspiring against him "frivolous," stating that they "are not merely unlikely; they are fantastical and delusional."

But she also expressed "sincere sympathy," adding "This brief decision does not intend to convey disregard for the cruel turn of fate [Ross] has experienced."

Neighbors said Thursday that Ross had owned his house at 4542 N. Bernard St., but sold it as his debt increased. He continued to rent the house, paying \$2,535.80 a month while living alone with a large dog and a cat.

"I thought he had a couple of screws loose in his head," said neighbor Rafael Farfan.

"He was like Mr. Grinch, you know?" Farfan said. "He kept to himself."

Bradley K. Sullivan, who represents landlords Hilda Landa and her husband Jose Garfias, said Ross' one-year lease on the house ran out Feb. 5. Sullivan said his clients went to court Feb. 23 to have Ross evicted because he would not leave.

Ross was supposed to appear in court on the eviction Thursday.

In his letter to the NBC5, Ross said he had been living in his van since Feb. 14, "and when I finally got numb enough to care about nothing, I finally did it on Feb. 28, 2005."

He expressed regret for killing Michael Lefkow, 64, and Donna Grace Humphrey, 89, saying "they personally did to me no wrong."

But, the note said, he had no choice but to shoot them after they saw him there waiting. The note said Ross arrived at 4:30 a.m. and that he killed Michael Lefkow at about 9 a.m. He shot Humphrey after she yelled for her son-in-law, the note said.

"I followed with a second shot to the head in both cases to minimize their suffering," the note said.

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Caption: PHOTOS 3

PHOTO (color): Police investigators in West Allis, Wis., on Thursday examine the van in which Bart Ross killed himself Wednesday afternoon. WTMJ-TV photo via AP. PHOTO (color): Investigators leave Bart Ross' home at 4542 N. Bernard St. after

collecting evidence tying the frustrated cancer victim to the Feb. 28 killings of Michael Lefkow and Donna Humphrey. Tribune photo by Chuck Berman. PHOTO (color): Chicago Police Supt. Philip Cline (left) and members of the task force investigating the Lefkow killings, Robert D. Grant of the FBI and Kim Widup of the U.S. Marshals Service. Tribune photo by Zbigniew Bzdak.

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