

The Hell of Hare Krishna

David Noonan

This one starts in a shopping center in Queens. It leaps in a flash to India, and comes back again to rumble around in the sacred attic where the Bill of Rights is stashed hard by the nuclear family. It touched down in the charged mist behind the eyes, where each individual makes his decisions, about socks, about suicide, presumably according to his own will. It forces God out into the headlines again. It bounces around every motel room from here to the coast, and even stops briefly in a Massachusetts mental hospital. It's got lawyers, mothers, private eyes, daughters, psychiatrists, judges, and high-powered P.R. men with shaved heads, saffron robes and sneakers. Yes, it's a genuine, spooks-galore American drama, knee deep in apple pie and topped with the first "mind control" indictments ever handed down anywhere, and so far it's stretched over five months. But it starts in a shopping center in Queens, and rightly so.

Last August 3, Merylee Kreshower was in the Fresh Meadows Shopping Center with her mother, Edith. It was a rare outing, for Merylee's contact with her mother had been minimal in the two-and-a-half years since she had last lived at home, and it's not likely that she was much interested in shopping. At 23, Merylee had already passed the better part of three years as a devotee in the Hare Krishna movement, and was living in the group's temple on West 55th Street in Manhattan. She was working hard to renounce everything the shopping center's jumble of stores represented, and had even relinquished the name she was born into. She had become Murti Vanya, and as Murti Vanya was living a rigorously ascetic life, pouring all her energy into the pursuit of spiritual perfection, studying and chanting her way toward the ideal she had placed at the center of her life, a pure and total awareness of the god she had chosen, Krishna.

The Abduction

Her mother did not go for it, at all. She sincerely believed that her only daughter had been stolen from her, and was being exploited for the personal gain of the Krishna movement leaders. So Edith Kreshower took Merylee/Murti Vanya shopping that afternoon, after a trip to the doctor earlier in the day, and before hundreds of witnesses, including a friend of Merylee/Murti Vanya's from the Manhattan temple, tried to steal her back. There was a van, a private detective from Westchester, some screaming, a struggle, and Merylee/Murti Vanya was gone, whisked away to the Deer Park Motor Inn, the first stop in what her mother had hoped would be a quick journey back to the status quo.

According to later testimony, Merylee/Murti Vanya spent the rest of the day in a state of total hysteria. She



Offerings from people attending a service at the temple

"wrecked the room she was in," cursed "like 20 truck drivers," threw herself around, and threatened to kill herself and her mother. It was the first day of her deprogramming, and it ended when she and the people who had snatched her were booted out of the Deer Park for creating a disturbance. From the Deer Park, Merylee/Murti Vanya was taken to another room on Long Island for the night, before she was finally moved to Kingston, New York, where the deprogramming was kept up in earnest until August 7.

Edith Kreshower now believes that all the early moving around contributed to the failure of the deprogramming. Failure indeed. Merylee/Murti Vanya returned to the temple immediately upon her release,



Adi Kesava

Trai Das

than in establishing the facts about the incident in the shopping center. One of the questions the women were asked that day concerned the chanting beads they were wearing. They were asked if they really believed their bodies would burst into flames if the beads were removed.

The girls removed the beads in response, but further questioning along the same line left them pretty well freaked. They concluded that the Grand Jury was heading off on a strange tangent, and a decision was made at the temple not to spend any more time or energy on the case. Deprogrammings had become an unfortunate fact of life for the Krishna people, and if Queens Grand Jury was starting to go haywire, they reasoned, it would be better to ignore the whole thing.

...and Two

But it was too late for that. In early September the Grand Jury dismissed the charges against Edith Kreshower and Galen Kelly. But, as those mysterious organs of the law are sometimes wont to do, it decided to go hunting for some heads, shaved ones to be exact, with little knots of hair at the back. It was the old switcheroo.

Schwed has said that the Grand Jury was acting strictly on its own when it requested more information about the Hare Krishna movement. He denies that he led it at all, and implies that Edith Kreshower's impassioned testimony sparked the members' interest. Of course any defense attorney in the country will swear that a grand jury is almost always a mere tool of the prosecution, lost at sea in the intricate murk of the law, and dangerously willing to be led. In this case, Edith Kreshower herself said that Schwed "definitely" played a key role in continuing the investigation of the Hare Krishna movement, aided of course by a Grand Jury she described as "wonderful." "They looked like parents and grandparents," she told the *Past*.

The Investigation

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the Grand Jury's change in direction was an unusual alliance that sprang up, and provided the proceedings with powerful momentum. Suddenly, instead of a kidnapping case, Schwed found himself handling a wide-open investigation of the Hare Krishna movement. He found himself standing before a Grand Jury that wanted to hear more about the people who had driven a mother to kidnap her own daughter, a Grand Jury that clearly wasn't interested in talking to content members of the sect, but wanted to hear the real poop, some dirt, something with meat on it. And Schwed had to produce, for this was a rare opportunity. He had to come up

with some ex-Krishnas, some psychiatrists, psychologists, and other expert witnesses who could fill the Grand Jury in on the "real" story behind this strange sect. Now, where could he lay his hands on those kinds of people, just like that? Where could he find them fast? Well, Schwed did the logical thing, he turned to Galen Kelly, private eye and professional deprogrammer, and the man he had been attempting to indict for kidnapping only days before.

Kelly admits that, at Schwed's request, he lined up many of the witnesses who appeared before the Grand Jury after the charges against him had been dropped and the Hare Krishna had become the target of the hearings. Those witnesses reportedly included 23 ex-members of the Krishna movement, and a mixed bag of "experts." One person who definitely testified is Dr. George Swope, professor of psychology and sociology at Westchester Community College. Swope, incidentally, is also the president of an organization called Citizens Engaged in Rewriting Families (CERF), a White Plains group that apparently serves as a sort of deprogramming clearinghouse. It was by way of CERF that Edith Kreshower first learned about the ins and outs of deprogramming, and made contact with Kelly.

Kelly is an interesting man. He said he got what he calls his "cult" experience doing investigative work for a variety of law enforcement agencies around the country. His specialty used to be investigations of what he termed "social activist groups." He wouldn't name any specific group he had investigated, but he did let the SLA slip out by mistake. If memory serves, the search for Patty Hearst was so wide and costly it probably involved every private eye in the country. Kelly said he's done "70 or 80" deprogrammings since he first got into the business by helping out Ted Patrick on the West Coast about a year-and-a-half ago. Kelly is tied into what he described as a loose, nationwide underground movement, made up of individuals as well as organizations like CERF, that is dedicated to "freeing" the members of the various

religious movements that have sprung up in the country over the last few years. He's loaded with horror stories about the groups, and speaks of a number of different conspiracy possibilities. He said he charges between "nothing and \$2000" for a deprogramming.

Kelly turned out to be Schwed's ace-in-the-hole, and after the dust settled in the courtroom, notoriety had been secured for all involved. History had been made. Schwed had secured the first "mind control" indictments ever handed down.

The Indictment

On October 12, Angus Murphy and Harold Connolly, leaders of the Manhattan temple of Hare Krishna, and known as Adi Kesava and Trai Das, respectively, were arrested and charged with unlawful detainment by use of mind control techniques. Connolly and Murphy were later released on their own recognizance. The brainwashing busts had finally come down. Merylee/Murti Vanya, their alleged victim, was picked up the same day and ordered held on \$50,000 bail as a material witness. She was held for the next week, ironically, in a motel room before being released. Also ordered held on the same bail as a material witness was Edward Shapiro, AKA Basu Gopal, the other alleged victim of mind control techniques.

Now follow this a moment, because Shapiro's case is an interesting footnote to this whole story. In addition to the mind control charges, Murphy and Connolly were also charged with attempted extortion. The target of that alleged attempt was Shapiro's father, and it was supposedly a "give us \$20,000 or never see your son" scam. Well, Shapiro was available to be picked up as a material witness only because he had shown up in New York to allay his father's fears about him. Once Shapiro had been taken into custody as a material witness, Schwed, apparently cooperating with Shapiro's father, pulled a move that later brought the heat of Queens Supreme Court Judge Thomas Agresta down on his head. Schwed requested that Shapiro's material witness order be vacated and the judge complied. Schwed then had Shapiro marched out of court under

guard and placed in an ambulance, to be carted off to a mental hospital on Long Island, presumably to be committed by his father, though young Shapiro, 22, had not been declared incompetent.

The New York Civil Liberties Union lawyers who were representing the Hare Krishna interests called the hospital and warned officials there that they would be up to their necks in litigation if they admitted Shapiro. They didn't, and his father subsequently had him taken to Massachusetts, where he was successful in getting his son committed. Young Shapiro sat in a hospital outside Boston until a hearing was held in November, when doctors from the hospital testified that there was no reason for Shapiro to be confined. He is now living in a temple in Boston, but a warrant has again been issued for him as a material witness in Queens. In addition to all that, Shapiro had been the victim of a Ted Patrick deprogramming attempt only 18 months before.

Krishna Reacts

Naturally a lot of publicity accompanied the indictments, and while the Krishna people felt somewhat persecuted, they also recognized an extraordinary opportunity to do what they like to do most, namely, *Spread the Word*. But the people in the New York temple weren't quite up to handling a story that had representatives of every newspaper and TV station in the metropolitan area pounding on their door. So the word went out to send in some heavies. Enter Balavanta, one of the top 16 Krishna leaders in the world. Former president of the Atlanta temple, a philosophy major from Emory University with six years as a Hare Krishna member, Balavanta was a young, intense, somewhat cagey Southerner, complete with drawl, who had more than a little experience doing battle in the gap between his movement and the rest of the world. (He ran for Mayor of Atlanta in 1973.) Along with another heavy flown in from Florida, Balavanta mobilized a P.R. program aimed at clearing up misconceptions and getting the word out.

He displayed an intense dislike for deprogrammers and their ilk, even tossing the word fascist around to help describe them. But all he could do in this case was arrange a press conference and troop out some experts and some parents to defend the movement. And, of course, he could wave the First Amendment around, and earmark the indictments as an infringement on the freedom of religion.

Legally, the First Amendment is clearly at the root of this case. And the courtroom

battle, when and if it comes, will pit experts against experts, and they will all back away at the elusive nuances of the inexact terms "mind control" and "brainwashing." But the real heart of the case seems too intangible to ever be addressed properly in a court of law. For the real heart of this case is running loose in no less a jungle than the middle class American culture, complete with its naugahyde vines and its countless variations on the big boy himself, God.

"The thing that frightens me is that a group like this can use mind control to create an army of zombies or robots who could undermine the government and law enforcement." Michael Schwed said that. And when he did he hit home with parents all across the country. The Hare Krishna lifestyle is radical and strange. In essence, it represents an indictment of nothing less than American society. Members of the movement admit that for them the traditional concept of family, as it is understood in this country, is alien and unnecessary. Leaders admit that contact with the family is not encouraged, and a number of sources say it is actually discouraged.

Balavanta said that as a result of the increase in deprogramming attempts in the last year, a plan is underway to increase contact between Krishna members and the people they left behind on the "outside." But even with that effort, he said, the family concept is still, and will remain, irrelevant to Hare Krishna members, and will probably never get much of their energy.

Never the Twain

For their part, many parents of members, and the people who dedicate their energies to deprogramming, simply cannot believe that any young person would voluntarily throw over the whole of their first 20-or-so years of upbringing to pursue such a strict way of life, for an ideal as intangible as the "knowledge" of a strange Eastern concept of god. So they risk jail to get their children back, and use techniques that are probably closer to brainwashing than anything that goes on in the temples in the process. They act out of fear, and one can sympathize with the incredible desperation that forces parents into the days-long motel room horror shows that most deprogrammings become. And one can easily find fault with some of the Hare Krishna movement's more bizarre teachings and practices, particularly with respect to attitudes about women and children, and their relentless proselytizing on the streets. But the fact remains that, at the bottom line, the Krishna people have chosen to live the way they do. And if their practices reinforce their faith, and from the outside those same practices appear to involve a form of brainwashing, or mind control, well, a look at any Catholic grammar school should provide some perspective on that.

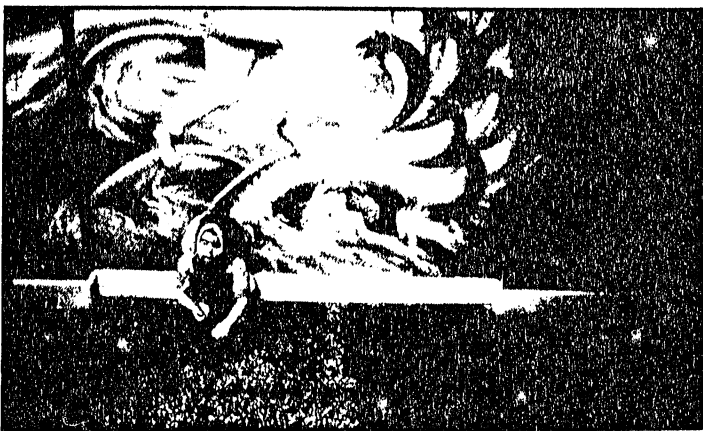
Finally, membership in the Hare Krishna movement is a form of rejection, a powerful form which many parents seek to explain outside their true relationships with their children. Often they turn instead to theories about brainwashing. Until now, this railing against a child's opting for change had remained a thing of the home, a private act, and actually illegal in some cases; above and beyond the law. With the Queens indictments, however, the Government, and that's with a capital G, wades in for the first time, and great truckloads of questions, moral, legal, and theological as well, are dumped on the table.

Presently the defense attorneys are waiting to see if they can get copies of the grand jury minutes, which are understandably considered crucial in this case. They'll find out on January 19.

Gene Harley, one of the defense attorneys, believes the delay in preparing the minutes for the judge (they're said to run to 1200 pages) is the fault of Schwed, who, Harley says, was hoping one or both of his witnesses might relinquish their Hare Krishna beliefs in time for the trial. No such thing has occurred, so far



In Times Square



In the temple