

Los Angeles, CA  
(Los Angeles Co.)  
Los Angeles Times  
(Cir. D. 1,037,963)  
(Cir. Sun. 1,244,713)

DEC 13 1977

Allen's P. C. B. Est. 1888

# Mystics and Mobsters: Focus on a Curious Alliance

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It was one of the more curious alliances — Far Eastern mysticism and East Coast mobsters. Add elements of international book-dealing and six-figure bank accounts and the picture becomes even more bizarre.

The central event was the death of Steven Bovan who was gunned down outside a Newport Beach restaurant.

But in reality, Steven Bovan had only a supporting role. His death did little more than to focus public and police attention on a scenario that had been playing out for several years.

The setting is Southern California's Gold Coast — Newport Beach and Laguna Beach; the former with its reputation for money and financial high-rolling, the latter with its vaguely exotic atmosphere.

The players are legitimate businessmen and confidence men, shave-headed monks and strong-arm thugs, dope dealers and cookie sellers.

And, according to police investigators and witnesses who testified before the Orange County Grand Jury, the action went something like this:

About a year ago, a new and well-heeled investment company opened an office in the burgeoning financial area adjacent to Orange County Airport.

The firm was known as Prasadam, Inc., unremarkable except for its name — Prasadam, the Sanskrit word for "international." But according to Grand Jury witnesses — some of them former associates or employees of Prasadam — those appearances were deceptive.

The interior of the suite or offices was decorated with the surprisingly sensual paintings and artwork of the Hare Krishna religion. The offices even contained an area set aside for worship of the self-proclaimed deity, Krishna.

Three of the persons who formed P.D. Roy Christopher Richard, Joseph Gabriel Fedor, III and Joseph Shelton Davis III, had at one time been full-time devotees of the Krishna religion. Richard, a thin, sharp-featured young man, had for a time been president of the Laguna Beach Krishna temple.

Another young man involved in Prasadam, Alexander Kulik, had contributed at least \$25,000 to Krishna-sponsored book publishing, according to a Krishna magazine.

But despite their previous positions and affiliations, and in

spite of their continued self-profession of faith in the Indian religion, their position vis-a-vis the orthodox Krishna church was far from clear-cut.

According to officials of International Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), the corporate arm of the church, the three former members of the Laguna Temple had been expelled in late 1976 for failure to adhere to orthodox principles.

According to Robert Grant, a member of ISKCON who oversaw operations of the church in California, the three had fallen from grace by virtue of their personal use of drugs and indications they had even dealt drugs on a sizable scale.

But, Grant has admitted, the rift went even deeper.

Grant has characterized the Prasadam partners as heretics who "believed they could do anything, so long as it was in the name of their God." He says that Richard was the "guru" of a group of a dozen or more dissidents who represented a genuine challenge to the leadership of the orthodox Krishna church.

"The group used the church as a cover for what they were doing," Grant said. "And they wanted to continue to use that cover even after we expelled them."

Even that characterization may do some injustice to the relationship, since Richard, Davis and Kulik continued to be on good terms with the church's spiritual leaders in India despite ISKCON's expulsion order. Local ISKCON leaders say the Indian hierarchy was attempting to show the dissidents the error of their ways and to return them to the ways of righteousness.

Whatever the proper characterization of Prasadam's religious standing was, the newly incorporated investment firm very quickly got on with its secular purpose — business.

According to testimony before the Grand Jury investigating Bovan's death, within six months of its formation, Prasadam had already invested more than a \$500,000 in two business operations.

According to sworn statements by police, the source of that money was the international drug trade, specifically "honey oil," a potent form of refined marijuana which has long been imported from the Far East by traffickers from Laguna Beach and elsewhere, and a virtually pure form of Far Eastern heroin referred to in the underworld as "China

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# Bovan Murder Focuses Attention on Bizarre Alliance

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"White" or "Hong Kong No. 4."

There is evidence that Kulik has been involved in such narcotics trafficking. In 1972, he was arrested in Kabul, Afghanistan, with a large quantity of "honey oil" in his possession. His arrest at that time was as the result of an investigation that had begun in Laguna Beach.

And on Oct. 22, a few hours after Steven Bovan was killed, Kulik was again arrested, this time in Mission Viejo, by Orange County sheriff's deputies who said they found half a kilo of "China White," worth perhaps \$750,000, in his possession.

Whatever the source of its capital, Prasadam, on the surface, was involved in legitimate business. Through a marketing firm called Quest, PDI had, according to Grand Jury testimony, invested more than \$300,000 in a health-food product called "Bionic Bits."

An advertising man, Byron Linde, who testified before the Grand Jury, said part of the money, \$75,000, had gone to Universal Studios for use of the "Steve Austin Bionic Man" trademark in promoting the cookies.

The cookies and the marketing program were largely the brainchild of Linde and a PDI employee named Robert Shea. Shea, a garrulous, self-described "super-salesman," has told the Times and police that he had been involved with the Prasadam partners since well before the time they were expelled by ISKCON.

Shea claims, however, that his involvement was only in the legitimate business end of PDI and that, in fact, he was conducting the Bionic Bits venture in such a way that "the source of the money was going to become evident to the whole world."

"The longer I was around Davis and the rest," Shea said, "the more I got sick of their using the Krishnas, who are good people, as a cover. I figured if I could get PDI to spend enough money, somebody would begin asking questions about where the money came from."

If that was Shea's purpose, he seems to have succeeded admirably. Besides the \$300,000 that went into Bionic Bits through Quest, PDI also had, during its first six months in the investment business, dropped \$250,000 into a Costa Mesa

Shea and Linde, both suspected by PDI of stealing PDI funds, were called into a meeting at the Prasadam offices. The following day, however, came the grand jury between Dep. Dist. Atty. Carter and Rossi. The trial then happened.

Carter: "And what happened when Byron Linde and Bob Shea came into the offices of PDI?"

Rossi: "Well, we -- we caught them more or less and split them up..."

Carter: "Now, did you stay with Bob Shea?"

Rossi: "Yes..."

Carter: "And did Bob Shea develop a bloody car?"

Rossi: "Very quickly."

Carter: "Would you tell the Grand Jury how he developed the bloody car?"

Rossi: "He was sitting on the couch and got smacked in the ear."

Shea, according to the testimony, got "smacked in the ear" twice, once by Rossi and once by another of the Italians, Raymond Resco. The purpose of the smacking was to convince Shea to sign over to PDI his shares in Bionic Bits. According to Rossi, Shea was more than willing to do so.

Carter: "Well, he (Shea) said there would be no problem after you discussed the problem with him. Is that correct?"

Rossi: "Well, he signed it with the blood dripping on his collar."

The rest of the Italians' "business discussions" went in a similar fashion. Linde, when asked at gunpoint for \$35,000, agreed quickly to sell his house to raise the money.

Linde testified that he mentioned his willingness to sell the house to one of the Italians. The Italian, identified by Linde as Anthony Merone Jr., said, "It is a nice house. You have got two beautiful kids and I would hate to have

anything happen to them." At that time, I got a little sick," Linde testified.

Like Linde, Kirk agreed to turn over the equity in his house to PDI, after coaxing by the Italians. In their testimony, the two marketing men described their efforts to raise the \$35,000 cash PDI wanted, a job that took almost a week.

Rossi, in his testimony, corroborated Linde and Kirk. He also testified that only \$5,000 of the \$35,000 was turned over to PDI. He and the other four Italians split the rest among themselves. Rossi said that so far as he was concerned, the money was "just the beginning" of a relationship between Prasadam and the five Italians.

The relationship was also the beginning of the end of Steven Bovan's life.

Bovan had been an employee of PDI's other subsidiary, Delphi, the car-customizing firm. As such, he like most of the other employees apparently had become aware of the PDI money, and perhaps of its source.

Police investigators say that one of the rumors Bovan may have heard was that Alex Kulik kept at least \$1 million buried in a trunk somewhere in Southern California. That may explain why, several weeks after the Italians came to work for PDI, Kulik was kidnaped on the street outside the Prasadam offices.

According to Rossi, the kidnapers were identified as Bovan, another Delphi employee, Stan Kieffer, Robert Shea, and two other men.

(Shea, in an interview, denied that he was involved, and investigators now say he may not have been. But Shea says that Bovan and Kieffer were involved.)

According to Rossi, Kulik was hustled into a van on MacArthur Blvd. at gunpoint and driven around for an hour

while Bovan pistol-whipped and otherwise abused him in an effort to learn the location of the \$1 million.

Rossi said Kulik denied having such a cache, but he did offer Bovan \$100,000 that was in his safe at the PDI office. Bovan, Rossi testified, called PDI, demanded the money and said he would call back.

The PDI office manager, Joseph Federowski, immediately summoned Rossi and the other four Italians, thereby setting the stage for a shootout, a ransom, a high-speed chase and another shootout.

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# Murder, Drugs, 6-Figure Bank Accounts Mark Bizarre Alliance

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The Italians agreed to accompany Federowski when he delivered the ransom to the appointed rendezvous, a lookout point beside Interstate 5, south of San Clemente.

Rossi testified that he rode to the rendezvous with Federowski, holding the \$100,000 in a briefcase on his lap. During the ride, Rossi testified, he opened the briefcase, took out \$70,000 and hid it under the seat, assuring Federowski the kidnapers would not notice the ransom was light.

(Rossi also testified that the Italians made off with most of the approximately \$70,000 themselves. As near as he could remember, he said, the kidnapers got away with \$30,000, and the Italians with \$40,000. He testified that he returned the remaining \$30,000 to PDI later, and the Prasadarn partners were so pleased that they let him keep it.)

The rendezvous was made, and the kidnapers traded Kulik for the briefcase. A shot or two was fired in the exchange, Rossi said, and several of the Italians followed the kidnapers.

That, Rossi said, precipitated a running gun battle on a highway in northern San Diego County following which the abductors escaped.

Rossi testified that Kulik and the rest of the PDI group were, once they had caught their breath, enraged. They swore vengeance on the kidnapers. The vehicle of that vengeance was to be the Italians.

After several meetings to negotiate a price, Rossi testified, a final figure was agreed upon — \$25,000 for each of the five persons thought to be involved, a contract for five murders with a completion price of \$125,000.

During September, immediately following Kulik's abduction, Rossi and the other four Italians tried to fill the contract. They located Bovan's home in Fountain Valley and began periodically watching it; they let it be known in the bars and restaurants of Newport Beach that there would be a \$1,000 reward for the person who located Bovan.

Rossi testified that he and his colleagues even made a trip to San Diego to check out a

report that Shea and Kieffer had been seen in the free-lunch line at the Hare Krishna temple there.

Rossi said that the PDI group supplied them with a hypodermic full of pure heroin with which they were to fatally overdose the pair, should they be located.

(Shea, in an interview, said that he had been in the San Diego temple at the time the Italians were seeking him, but that friends had spirited him away when they learned of the planned killing.)

The search for the kidnapers was unsuccessful, Rossi testified, although it continued into October, despite the departure of the PDI partners. Rossi said the PDI group left to visit the spiritual head of the Krishna movement who was, at the time, ill and near death.

But, Rossi testified, the Italians were assured that the partners would return and honor the murder contracts, if they were filled.

In the case of Steven Bovan, the contract was filled early on the morning of Oct. 22, according to Rossi.

Rossi said that he was not present when Bovan was shot. And according to the prosecution, neither was another of the five Italians, Anthony Merone Sr. But, according to the prosecution, Jerry Peter Fiori, Anthony Merone Jr., and Raymond Resco were present when Bovan was spotted outside El Ranchito, a popular downtown Newport Beach after-hours club.

Newport Beach Det. Sam Amburgey who interviewed Merone Jr. and Fiori after their arrest on Oct. 26, testified before the Grand Jury that Fiori confessed to shooting Bovan.

Amburgey testified that Fiori said Bovan resisted when the three attempted to abduct him. Fiori, who according to the prosecution had been convicted in another gangland killing in the East, fired two shots which knocked the 6-foot 7-inch Bovan to the ground. Then, according to Amburgey's testimony, Fiori said he stood over Bovan and fired seven more shots into his body.

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# ALLIANCE OF MYSTICS, MOBSTERS

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All three then fled in Fiori's lime-green Cadillac convertible. Four days later, a Costa Mesa policeman spotted the distinctive car at a local auto dealership and arrested Fiori as he attempted to sell it. Within a few hours, investigators had begun to piece together the rest of the story and arrested Merone Jr. and Resco. Rossi and Merone Sr. were both interrogated extensively but were not jailed.

A few days later, investigators began to publicly reveal some of the more exotic aspects of the case, particularly the evidence of involvement on the part of the PDI partners.

Det. Amburgey even managed to locate and interview one of the PDI group, Joseph Federowski, before investigators became aware of the evidence involving PDI.

Federowski told Amburgey that PDI had not hired the Italians but rather had been victims of the same strong-arm tactics and extortion employed against Byron Linde and Robert Shea. He told Amburgey that the Italians were "bloodsuckers" on PDI, not employees of the firm. When Amburgey asked why PDI paid the Italians a salary, Federowski replied: "We gave them the money so that they didn't take the money."

Federowski's statements obviously failed to convince the police and the prosecution. Four days after Bovan's death, arrest warrants were obtained for Federowski, who had by that time disappeared, as well as for Alexander Kulik, his wife, Elsie, Joseph Davis and Roy Richard. The warrants charged them with conspiracy and murder in Bovan's death.

Several weeks later, the case was presented to the Grand Jury which returned an indictment against the three Italians previously charged and against the five Prasadams figures.

As of the moment, all but Federowski have been apprehended. Joseph Davis was captured in Bali, Indonesia, by authorities there and returned to Orange County. Roy Richard surrendered to Newport Beach police, after two days of negotiations, and is presently in jail in lieu of \$100,000 bail.

The easiest apprehension was that of Alexander Kulik, spotted by sheriff's deputies on Oct. 22 behind the wheel of a \$65,000 sports car that had been parked for several hours in a Mission Viejo shopping center parking lot.

According to the deputies, Kulik was either asleep or intoxicated and could not provide proper identification or car registration when questioned. He was arrested on a charge of being drunk in public, a charge that was quickly elevated when a deputy discovered 1.1 pounds of pure China White heroin hidden beneath a bag of vegetables in the car's back seat.

At that point, Kulik had not been linked to the death of Bovan. He was held in lieu of \$500,000 bail on the drug charge and was, according to jail officials, within a few minutes of posting that amount when Newport Beach police rearrested him on the murder and conspiracy charge. Within a few days, Kulik had managed to arrange collateral for the drug bail and for the additional \$250,000 requested on the murder-conspiracy charge.

He remained free for more than a month on that bail until last week when Newport Beach officers rearrested him on yet another charge — harboring a fugitive.

This latest charge stems from the fact, according to the officers who arrested Kulik, that he was hiding his wife, Elsie, in the La Costa Country club apartment he had rented under a false name.

To that charge was added an additional heroin possession charge arising from the discovery by officers the following day of 13 ounces of heroin hidden in the air cleaner of Kulik's truck.

By the end of the week, following the Kuliks' indictment by a San Diego federal grand jury and the raising of his Orange County bail, Alex Kulik was being held in lieu of \$3.7 million in bail; his wife, Elsie, was being held in lieu of \$275 million.