

Palme murder trial serves political aims

by Michael Ericson

As of this writing on June 22, what in Sweden has been named “the trial of the century” is finishing its second week of proceedings and the prosecution is halfway through its case against Krister Pettersson, the 42-year-old man accused of murdering Olof Palme on Feb. 28, 1986.

The first week of the trial seemed to be a continuation of all the scandalous errors committed during the now three-year-long police hunt for the murderer of the Swedish prime minister. Three of the prosecution witnesses, all friends of the accused from the same shady crime and drug underground world of Stockholm as he, totally reversed their stories in court compared to what they had said earlier in police interrogations. Their testimony for the prosecution was aimed to disprove the defendant’s claims that he had always liked Olof Palme and that he never was around the cinema or the site of the murder, but on his way home on a subway at the time. But in court these witnesses had nothing to say which was contradictory to the defendant’s story. One of the witnesses made things even worse for the prosecution by claiming that the policemen interrogating him had flashed a reward of almost \$8 million if the right answers would be provided!

Olof Palme’s widow, Lisbet Palme, is the only witness so far who was not drugged the night of the assassination, and who has with full assurance identified Pettersson as the man she saw, when she looked up from bending down over her shot husband. That has made the Swedish news media comment that they regard the outcome of the case to depend strictly on whether the court trusts Lisbet Palme’s words “beyond any reasonable doubt” against the words of the accused, who claims not to have been on the scene at that time. Even if they trust Lisbet Palme, she did not see him holding a weapon and therefore the prosecutors still will have to “prove” that there can be no possible alternative murderer other than Pettersson.

Purely circumstantial case

During spring 1987, a troika of prosecutors took over the leadership of the investigation from former Stockholm police

chief Hans Holmér, whose efforts to nail the Kurdish organization PKK for the crime had utterly collapsed. Holmér had run his investigation as a big “show hunt,” using the Swedish news media, which at that time was willingly working for Holmér. The new troika of prosecutors was very tight in their relations with the media, which here in Sweden instead can continue to make good money on the “Ebbe Carlsson scandal,” the “private” Palme investigation by Holmér and his close friend Ebbe Carlsson, which forced one more Swedish minister of justice to resign under very turbulent circumstances.

The prosecution case is, however, very weak. It is built on circumstantial evidence. The police have not one single hard or technical piece of evidence against the accused, not even an indirect piece of such evidence, such as whether Pettersson had access during the relevant time period to an unidentified murder weapon. The truth is that all the police investigations haven’t even produced a single trace of the murder weapon.

It’s also clear from the outset that convicting Pettersson for the crime would politically almost be “to good to be true.” With Pettersson sentenced for the crime, as a lone crazed assassin, more than one political establishment in the country might think there is a real chance to successfully put the lid on all further public of investigations of Palme, his friends, and his murderer, which have all been known to propel the country into a non-stop sequence of tumultuous political scandals.

The prosecution’s claims are as follows. Pettersson, an alcoholic and drug addict for almost his whole life, a criminal who at a point of deep personal crisis in the beginning of the 1970s stabbed a person to death almost at the same place as Palme was shot, and who escaped from that murder almost exactly the same way as the murderer of Palme did 10 years later, would—by chance, according to the prosecutors—have seen the Palme couple going to the cinema. Out of his personal “hatred” of Olof Palme he is claimed to have, on impulse, fetched the weapon from a friend’s flat just above the cinema. Then finally, when the Palmes came walking from the movie he would have followed them a couple of hundred meters to shoot Olof Palme, at the same place he had stabbed another person to death long before.

Pettersson himself claims to be fully innocent and actually to never have been around the cinema in question that particular night.

Violations of human rights

The question of how to protect the defendant’s human and legal rights has already moved to the forefront in the court case, because of severe violations of that aspect during the police investigation led by the prosecutors. To name just two: The prosecutors have not withdrawn the reward of almost \$8 million to whoever can give such information that ensures “the murderer of Olof Palme is caught.” That reward

is of course creating an incentive to all prosecution witnesses to give the answers they think the prosecutors wish to hear. Lisbet Palme has also arrogantly made demands on her cooperation with the investigation that border on obstruction of justice.

Already, in the police investigation, she refused to let the defense participate in the line-up confrontation, in which she had to pick the suspect out of a video line-up of 12 persons. After the video had been shown to the court, there is no doubt that the defense would have stopped the line-up from being carried out the way it was done. The accused, an alcoholic and drug addict, was easily recognized among the other 11 in the sample, who were policemen in civilian clothes. In fact the first thing Lisbet Palme, a trained child psychiatrist, said after seeing the video was that "number eight is an alcoholic, that you recognize."

The role of the press is also creating a lot of problems for Pettersson's legitimate interests in having his legal rights protected. The friend who, before the trial, had told both the press and police investigators that Pettersson came home half an hour later than he himself claimed, but now is reversing his story in court, also told the court why he had done so: "Because the press paid me for what I told them." So the press were here feeding a group of drug addicts and criminals money to provide them with a "good" story. No wonder the prosecution got into "problems" with this group of witnesses.

It is also by now an established fact that when Pettersson was first taken into custody for the murder of the Swedish prime minister on Dec. 14, 1988, that had not been the intention of the prosecutors. They had mailed him a letter asking him to come to the police station for questioning about the assassination of Palme to "study his reactions to that letter," i.e., if he would turn up voluntarily for such an interrogation. That plan had to be abandoned the same morning Pettersson should have received the letter, because of a leak to the press that the prosecutors suspected him as being the murderer.

The testimony of the widow

Lisbet Palme, who gave her testimony to the court only after demanding some very extraordinary preconditions for doing so, was very self-assured when she identified the defendant as the man she had recognized as the murderer, whose "staring eyes" she looked into the seconds after Olof and she had been shot at. "Do you mean that you have carried this picture in your memory for three years?" asked the defense lawyer.

"Yes, of course," answered Lisbet Palme in a way that was perhaps a bit too confident. She made it clear that she will never forget "the staring eyes" from that night her husband was murdered and that it is the same eyes she now sees in the defendant. In the beginning of her testimony, when she described how she moved toward the dying Palme on the street "to look for help," she adds a strange comment: "All

this happens very rapidly. I might perhaps in this context say that I am professionally trained to make observations and that I do make real observations without analyzing in the first step." It is as if she wished to stress that she is extra trustworthy in her testimony because she is not speculating on what she sees, something she, however, contradicts later in her testimony when the defense lawyer ask her if it isn't a bit "unreasonable" to assume that the murderer takes a couple of steps, then stops and looks at the two Palmes for one to three minutes (and she meets the "staring eyes,") after the shooting. "Is it not possible that you have made a mistake here and that there is another person standing in this way?" Lisbet Palme answers by saying that she has "viewed such behavior from psychological considerations" and that it is not rational to assume such a "behavior, but that it indicates that it is a person who has killed before."

To some extent the testimony the day after hers by her son Maarten Palme, who had joined his parents to see the movie together with his girlfriend, makes the impression that his mother is not really honest in her claims to be an extraordinarily trustworthy witness because she does not analyze her observations. Despite Lisbet Palme's denial in her testimony that she discussed different pictures of suspects with her son, Maarten claims to have occasionally done so with her.

The testimony of the widow did turn the court case to some degree. After two weeks of trial where it seemed that the prosecutors were being abandoned by all their own witnesses, there was one government witness standing firm with her story. The problem was that she was a bit too firm and presumptuous to be fully trustworthy. The political gains for the Social Democratic Party leadership to have a person convicted for the murder are very high, as was reflected in the end of the editorial of the party paper *Aftonbladet* the day after Lisbet Palme's testimony: "It is too early to predict the result of the trial. Even if the 42-year-old man is convicted, we will probably never know what exactly happened and why. Namely because we are dealing with an insane murder by a psychopath and in such a case the perpetrator is not able by himself to either acknowledge or give cause" for his actions.

The Palme investigations have not lost their capacity to propel Sweden into more earthshaking political scandals, and the most probable outcome of this ongoing "trial of the century" is that other such trials will follow in the co and that this one will be recorded in history as just another phase of a process.

The effects of that process on the political establishment are already quite significant. In an opinion poll carried out just before the Chinese massacre on Tiananmen Square, Swedes were asked which one of their party leaders they trusted most. The Communist Party leader ranked as the winner by a good margin, with 34% of those asked. The Communists only get 5-6% of the votes in Swedish parliamentary elections.