

UNMASKING 'SON OF SAM'S' DEMONS

By David Abrahamson

New York Times (1923-Current file); Jul 1, 1979;

ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2007)

pg. SM5



David Berkowitz claimed he had been ordered to kill by demons that spoke with the voices of barking dogs. Now, a psychiatrist who testified that Berkowitz was sane tells how he knew the demon story was a lie. Above, police mugshot of Berkowitz; Sam Carr's Labrador retriever.

Left: William Sauro—the New York Times / Right: Bert Miller-Black Star

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By David Abrahamson

For more than a year he had terrorized New York City, but when David R. Berkowitz was finally arrested and charged with killing six persons and wounding seven others, the self-styled "Son of Sam" insisted he'd had no choice. Demons, speaking with the voices of barking dogs, had ordered him out on

his late-night hunts for victims. Two court-appointed psychiatrists after long interviews with Berkowitz concluded that he believed in his demons, that he was psychotic and therefore not mentally fit to stand trial for murder. A third psychiatrist, however, reached an opposite conclusion, and so did the criminal justice system, which just a year ago accepted his plea of guilty and convicted him of murder, imposing a string of 25-year-to-life prison sentences. And last February, Berkowitz himself called a press conference in

Attica prison to announce that he had invented the story of his demons.

That announcement no doubt brought a sense of satisfaction to the judges who had pronounced sentence; it certainly gave me a feeling of relief. For, at the behest of Brooklyn District Attorney Eugene Gold, who was prosecuting the case, I had been asked to examine Berkowitz's mental condition and his fitness to stand trial. I had been that third psychiatrist.

It was by any definition a dramatic case, but the central dilemma of the

Son of Sam trial was all too familiar. Existing laws seek to distinguish carefully among different mental states in deciding whether a defendant understands the charges against him and is able to assist his lawyers in his own defense — the typical measures by which fitness to stand trial is determined. But such careful distinctions are difficult to arrive at. A defendant may clearly be emotionally ill, for example, and yet be

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competent," under the law. At issue, of course, is whether a person charged with a crime will face the full rigor of the legal system or will be confined to a mental hospital until such time as he is adjudged fit for trial.

During four decades of practice as a psychiatrist, I have been called upon dozens of times to examine defendants to help decide their "competence." And often the cases have centered on hallucinations that allegedly prevented the defendants from obeying the law — paying their income taxes, for example. My essential task in such cases, as it was in the Berkowitz case, is to find out if the hallucinations are "real." Do they have an independent existence in the defendant's mind and control his actions, which would mean he is psychotic and unable to stand trial? Or are they simply a conscious invention, which he himself controls?

The telephone call from District Attorney Gold was thus a familiar summons for me. I would visit Berkowitz as a psychiatrist engaged by the prosecution, and he would inevitably receive me as an adversary, though in fact I would reach my own, independent conclusions. He would also be made aware that what I learned would not be subject to the rigorous canons of privacy accorded a psychiatrist's patient.

David Berkowitz had been arrested on Aug. 10, 1977. In the weeks that followed, his round, childlike face stared out from television screens and front pages around the world, and his story that demons commanded him to kill won wide acceptance. It satisfied a horrified public searching for some explanation of his incomprehensible actions. Inevitably, my interviews with Berkowitz covered the essentials of his life and feelings, but the material that follows is focused on my efforts to get at the root of that single, central facet of the man — his demons.

At 1 P.M. on Aug. 31 I presented myself at the weatherbeaten, red-brick Kings County Hospital and was ushered to a tiny sixth-floor office on the prison ward to await the defendant's arrival. I sat at a small table, my back to the open door; Berkowitz entered silently, so much so that I almost didn't hear him. He wore the hospital's faded blue pajamalike uniform.

I rose and started to introduce myself, but he interrupted me and announced, in a commanding tone: "I know who you are. You're Dr. Abrahamson. I read your book, 'The Murdering Mind.'" We shook hands and he smiled; he had a firm handshake.

Berkowitz had been informed that a psychiatrist was waiting, but not told the identity of the psychiatrist. Perhaps he had remembered my face from newspaper photographs, perhaps from the photograph on the jacket of the book — but whichever, it seemed clear that any mental illness he might have had not affected his memory.

I asked where he had found my book, which was not, after all, at the top of the best-seller list. At the Yonkers Pub-

lic Library, he said, and went on to say he had visited other libraries and taken out books about murderers, including notorious mass murderer Richard Speck. Such absorption in the subject of murder, such deliberate interest, did not seem to suggest the confusion that usually accompanies insanity.

Moreover, throughout this first two-hour session, Berkowitz showed himself to be alert, perceptive and highly intelligent. He spoke easily, often animatedly, in a socially appropriate manner. (He also spoke loudly, because the noise from the hospital corridor came in through the partly-open door. A young correction officer sat out there, keeping an eye on the prisoner.)

A person who imagines he is possessed by demons and that he has received commands to kill is insane (the legal term) and psychotic (the medical term). Thus, he suffers either from paranoia, an extremely rare form of insanity marked by distorted beliefs that are impervious to reason, or from schizophrenia, a thought disorder marked by confusion, a loss of memory and the inability to understand what is going on within him or around him or to hold a job. In other words, he is a disorganized personality.

After just a single interview, it was clear to me that Berkowitz did not exhibit the symptoms of schizophrenia. And the clear-headed cunning with which he had selected the time and place of his killings and eluded for a whole year the greatest police manhunt in recent memory hardly seemed to be typical psychotic behavior. But I was far from having enough evidence to reach a diagnostic conclusion. That would take six or seven more sessions and, as it turned out, interviews with a variety of people whose lives had been touched by the Son of Sam.

The sessions with Berkowitz were not easy going. When I introduced certain subjects — not so incidentally, the kinds of subjects that yielded the most of value psychologically speaking — he often resisted. I wanted to know about his childhood, for example, and about his family life in search of clues to explain his behavior as an adult, but he always drifted away to talk about the demons. At one point during our second meeting, when I started to ask about his family, he interrupted angrily: "I have said too much already about them."

And in a way, he was right. The clues were there. He told me, for example, that another boy had hit him on the head with a metal pipe, and he had bled, and the people who lived on the block had come running, and an ambulance had been called. He turned the event into a dramatic vignette, suggesting a special need to call attention to himself, to prove his importance.

He was an expansive person, with a desire to be in the limelight and a fertile imagination. These attributes — combined with a high order of intelligence and a seductive manner — were some of the psychological weapons he brought to bear upon those of us who sought to get behind his mask.

I recalled reading a police report that when Berkowitz was arrested in his car

he had said, with a small smile, "You finally got me. What took you so long?" Underneath the obvious irony he intended to show I detected feelings of guilt. And they were further confirmed in a comment to me: "I was glad in a way they caught me."

Such guilt feelings, I knew, could be of the greatest importance, but how could I get at them? "Have you had any dreams here?" I asked him one day. He told of dreaming that he had met an authority figure, from whom he sought forgiveness. It seemed clear to me that the dream indicated his unconscious desire for absolution from the guilt he felt about his murders. But he strongly protested such an interpretation; he was not looking for forgiveness, he insisted. And thereafter, he refused me each time I asked him to tell about his dreams.

Yet it was clear that the dream had expressed his true feelings. And if he wanted to repent, it meant he had feelings of guilt, which in turn suggested that he was not insane and that his story about the demons — whom he blamed for his crimes — was a fiction.

But Berkowitz himself was devoted to the tale of the demons — General Cosmo and Sam Carr — who spoke to him through the medium of howling dogs. During our first interviews, they were just about all he wanted to talk about, which was itself revealing. People who have hallucinations are usually frightened enough to take no joy in discussing them. Yet whenever we got on sensitive ground, Berkowitz would retreat to that subject. If I tried to move away from them, he would protest petulantly, "You don't believe me." He would speak of the demons as having "taken my soul." Or he would say, "They looked like people sometimes, but at night they changed. They looked like monsters."

They looked worse at night; they were more threatening to him then. But how could they change from one time of day to another, I wondered. Berkowitz had told me of his nightmares as a child, and children do often report having bad dreams about monsters. But they usually grow out of them. Had his stories of nightmares simply been an attempt to make his demons seem more plausible?

I asked Berkowitz when he first experienced the demons.

"I began to hear them just after I moved to Yonkers," he said.

He had moved from an apartment in the Bronx to one in New Rochelle in February 1976 and then, three months later, to Yonkers. Yet at an earlier session he had admitted trying to murder a young woman with a knife on the day before Christmas, 1975. "She screamed pitifully," he had said. He had fled from the scene and never been caught.

But if he had not heard from the demons until 1976, it meant that he had made his first murder attempt without being "commanded" to do so by the demons. But I kept such thoughts to myself.

"Who told you to kill?" I asked.
"Sam."
"How did you get the idea about Sam Carr?"
"A long story," he said, curtly, evasively.
And then, for the first time, he became flustered, hesitating, starting to fidget. The gusto and bravado with which he had answered most of my previous questions had disappeared.

I repeated my question:
"How did you get the idea about Sam Carr?"

Looking as if he had been caught with his hand in the cookie jar, he finally replied:

"I met Sam Carr in the distance. Not everyone gets too close. He's very reclusive. It looks like a dog; he talks through it. He hears it."

"How do you know this?" I asked.
"How?" he answered angrily. "You wouldn't understand."

But I tried again:
"How did you get the idea about Sam Carr?"

"I went down there." He spoke awkwardly, he was upset — but I pursued.

"Where?"
"Down the street, where his house was."

"How did you find his house?"
"I saw it," he finally admitted. I sought to help him over his embarrassment.

"You saw it from your window, isn't it so? You live high up on a hill, and Sam Carr lives down, far down below, possibly 200 feet from you in a direct line of vision."

As I spoke, Berkowitz was looking at me, wondering how I'd discovered all that. I had not told him of my trip out to his apartment house in Yonkers and to the small house of the real person named Sam Carr.

After a while I asked, "What did you do then?"

"I went down and looked at the house and saw his name and address outside the house."

"So you found Sam Carr. He exists in reality."

Berkowitz nodded. It was a dramatic moment, for he had previously denied that fact, insisting Sam was a demon only.

It turned out he had been down outside Sam Carr's house several times.

"Why did you go down to Sam?" I asked.

Sitting in his apartment, he said, he had heard some howling and barking and wanted to find out what it was all about.

"What happened then?"

"When I stood outside Carr's house, I couldn't hear anything, but when I came back to my apartment, I again heard a dog barking."

This was significant news. The voice of the demon came and went, depending upon where Berkowitz was physically located. It was as though he could determine its actions by his own movements. Instead of its controlling him, he controlled it. (Later he would tell me that the voices of the demons had become weak and even disappeared when he visited Florida and Texas, only to reappear when he returned East.

Again, what he did seemed to govern the behavior of the demons, rather than vice versa.)

"Have you seen Sam?" Berkowitz now asked me.

"No," I said. "Why do you ask?"

He replied in a rather cocky tone of voice, "I was just wondering," his words trailing off.

I pondered the reason for his question. It seemed to me that he was shaken. Having admitted that Sam existed as a human being, and that the demon barking stopped or started as he himself moved, Berkowitz was suspicious. Had I talked in person with Sam Carr? Had I discovered not simply that he was a real person but that he was not a demon?

Finally, I asked: "Would you like me to see him?"

He hesitated for a second, but he didn't answer.

My next step was to explore Berkowitz's feelings about dogs, the means by which the demons supposedly spoke to him.

I knew that he had shot Sam Carr's dog, a black Labrador retriever.

"Are you afraid of dogs?" I asked.

"No," he answered angrily. He emphasized every word: "I love them. I know them well."

Then he told the following story:

"I used to work as a night security watchman for a trucking concern in New York City for about two years, until May 1976. I loved those dogs. We were buddies. I took care of them, fed them, bathed them."

While working there, he said, one of the guard dogs had bitten him on the left arm, drawing blood.

"I bit him back," Berkowitz said, laughing as he said it.

"You what?" I asked incredulously.

"Oh, no," he said. "I only joked. I gave him the chains. The dogs were off the leash; I was usually by myself. . . I liked the dogs. I didn't want to leave them."

It was supposed to be a joke, but the suggestion that he had bitten the dog revealed the strength of his desire for revenge. Notwithstanding his professed love for dogs, he was afraid of them.

That fear was confirmed by his landlady in New Rochelle. When he wanted to rent her attic apartment, she told him she had two dogs. He blurted out: "I don't like dogs." "Take it or leave it," she immediately countered, "the dogs are going to stay." He meekly accepted the arrangement.

The contradiction between his purported love of dogs and his actual fear of them was striking. They seemed a constant irritant in his life.

In my effort to find out more about Berkowitz, I was going beyond the standard office interview approach, traveling to the sites where he had lived and worked. I talked, for example, with a former neighbor of his at an apartment in the Bronx. About 30 feet below his one-time apartment there was a yard with a fence around it in which a very large black German shepherd had been tied up; it barked and howled to a degree the neighbors found unbearable. My informant said: "I didn't know what to do. Once I called the police about it. But there was nothing they could do. They got many complaints from other neighbors. Berkowitz's windows faced the yard."

If Berkowitz had heard dogs talking to him, it would mean he had had true hallucinations. A genuine hallucination, however, originates from within. Here, there was ample evidence to suggest that the stimulus was external — from real dogs.

My field research took me to the Post Office in the Bronx where Berkowitz had worked until about a week before his arrest. Several postal employees who worked with him told me that "there was nothing wrong with him." One young woman told me, among other things: "He showed no disturbance, didn't even blink an eye when I

mentioned the .44 caliber killer. [He was] just like any other person. He is the last person I would suspect. He was always courteous. If we had to lift anything heavy, he helped us. He was a gentleman, opened the door for you, and he was never vulgar."

I asked a young woman who worked with him whether there was anything peculiar about him. "No," she said. "He even walked us to the car once. We got off at 12:30 A.M. My friend was parked on a deserted street a few blocks away. We were glad to have someone walking with us to the car. We were afraid of going there because of the Son of Sam. He was parked on the opposite side of the street. He waited for us to start our car, and we waited for him to start his, and then we left."

"How did you hear about the arrest?" I asked.

"I had heard they arrested a suspect. When I saw his face in the newspaper, I didn't want to believe it was him. I was shocked. I couldn't believe it."

The many interviews I had with postal workers provided additional proof that Berkowitz at work behaved normally, and was known as a good and reliable employee.

A psychosis cannot be turned on or off at the behest of the patient, unless, of course, the patient is pretending. One day I asked Berkowitz: "Do you think one can talk oneself into something?" He replied: "Yes, one could talk oneself into something, but I didn't do that."

As was so often true with Berkowitz, the literal response was in keeping with his already stated position, yet the very language of the response suggested his awareness of this inclination in himself.

Had he really heard the demons' voices, or had he talked himself into hearing them?

One day Berkowitz told me of a mission to Long Island. "I went out," he said, "to the Hamptons in the first week of August. I had instructions to kill many people in Southampton. In the afternoon I looked at a map to drive out there. I had the guns with me and came to Southampton [in fact, it was East Hampton] late in the afternoon. I drove to the beach, Asparagus Beach, Amagansett. I sat on the sand a couple of hours. I had to wait till nightfall. It started to rain and I had to go then. The operation had to be postponed to the following weekend. Disappointed. Ten o'clock. I was very tired when I came back to town and had something to eat and went to bed."

Then he added: "The beach was a medium-sized beach. When it began to rain, people left."

"And you?"

"I left, too."

"You had intended to kill someone and you couldn't kill because it began to rain?"

"Yes."
It became very clear that this was not a man who killed only on the orders of demons. They had ordered him to go out, that day in August, and kill. He had decided to do otherwise. Thus, he could control his murderous impulses, and his murderous behavior had been voluntary, deliberate.

The signal, the command to kill which he said he received from the demons, I finally concluded, had in fact been his invention. It was a command dictated by strong, repressed sexual urges. He was afraid of women and afraid of being rebuffed by them; he didn't dare approach them to satisfy his sexual desires. Yet to counteract his conscious and unconscious fears, he still had to show them that he was powerful. His gun was the solution: He could overwhelmingly demonstrate his power without touching them, without being rebuffed.

I found Berkowitz to be impulsive, but not insane; the impulses were controllable. He had a character disorder, with many hysterical traits mixed in — growing from a need to call attention to himself, to make himself more important than he is.

David Berkowitz had created his demons as an alibi, an excuse for his murders. He could then say, "I didn't kill, the demons did it," thereby lessening his guilt in the world's eyes. People would feel better about him. But he didn't succeed. His guilt feelings were stronger than he knew; they kept poking through the fiction he had created. And, in the end, they helped convince me of his competence to stand trial.

Following completion of this article, as I was preparing to leave for Chicago to deliver a paper on the psychodynamics of David Berkowitz, I received a letter from Berkowitz, himself. It began: "Sam Carr and the Demons . . . Yes, it was all a hoax, a silly hoax, well planned and thought out. I just never thought this 'demon' story would carry out so much." ■

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Berkowitz was held in an isolation cell in Kings County Hospital.