

Irving Kanarek, Lawyer Who Defended Charles Manson, Dies at 100

The national spotlight that focused on Mr. Kanarek made his disruptive circus of courtroom tactics almost as fascinating as his bizarre clients.

By **Robert D. McFadden**

Sept. 3, 2020

Irving Kanarek, a Los Angeles lawyer who defended Charles Manson in the cult killings of the actress Sharon Tate and six other people, and Jimmy Smith, whose murder of a police officer was chillingly retold in Joseph Wambaugh's 1973 best seller "The Onion Field," died on Wednesday in Garden Grove, Calif. He was 100.

His nephew Kany Levine confirmed the death.

Those killings were among the most notorious crimes of the 1960s, and the national spotlight that focused on their trials made Mr. Kanarek's disruptive circus of courtroom tactics almost as fascinating as his bizarre clients — Mr. Manson, the cult leader with a "family" of young drifters, and Mr. Smith, a petty thief who did not quite know how to operate the automatic pistol he carried.

For Mr. Kanarek, the trials were high points in a three-decade practice given to a more routine caseload of personal injury and damage claims. The law was not even his first calling. He had been an aerospace engineer for North American Aviation, but had lost his Air Force security clearance and his job after being falsely accused of Communist associations in the 1950s. He cleared his name, but the experience had soured him on science.

His first major case arose in Los Angeles on a March night in 1963 with a routine traffic stop for a broken taillight on a car carrying Mr. Smith and Gregory Powell. As two officers, Ian Campbell and Karl Hettinger, approached, Mr. Smith and Mr. Powell drew guns, disarmed the officers and drove them 90 miles north to a remote onion farm near Bakersfield, Calif.

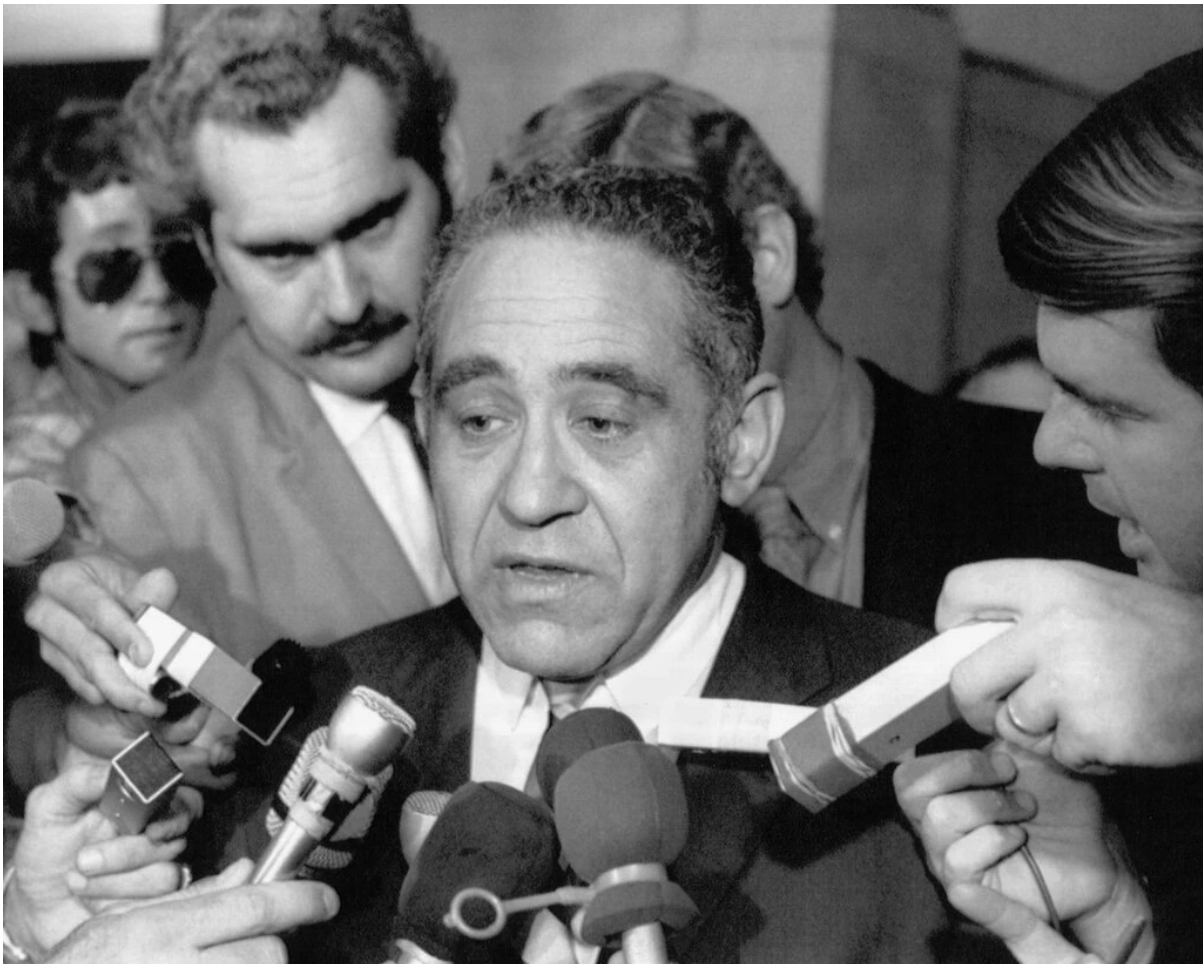
Mr. Wambaugh's novelistic treatment described Mr. Campbell's killing:

“Gregory Powell raised his arm and shot Ian in the mouth,” he wrote. “For a few white-hot seconds the three watched him being lifted up by the blinding fireball and slammed down on his back, eyes open, watching the stars. He probably never saw the shadow in the leather jacket looming over him, and never really felt the four bullets flaming down into his chest.”

Mr. Hettinger fled into the darkness and escaped. Mr. Powell and Mr. Smith were caught, tried for murder, convicted and sentenced to death.

But the case became a seven-year marathon of appeals, mistrials, reversals and reinstatements. Mr. Kanarek won Mr. Smith’s first reversal and defended him in other proceedings, but he was eventually fired by Mr. Smith, who threw a chair at him.

Those death sentences were commuted to life in prison in 1972 by a California Supreme Court ruling that temporarily invalidated the state’s death penalty. Mr. Smith was paroled in 1982, but was in and out of prison for the rest of his life on parole violations. He and Mr. Powell both died in prison in their late 70s.



Mr. Kanarek with reporters outside a Los Angeles courtroom in 1970 during Mr. Manson’s murder trial. He was known for his disruptive courtroom tactics. Associated Press

Mr. Kanarek's next — and last — famous client was Mr. Manson. On Aug. 9, 1969, a cleaning lady entering a Benedict Canyon home in North Beverly Hills, Calif., found the mutilated bodies of Ms. Tate, 26, the pregnant wife of the director Roman Polanski, as well as three friends and a chance visitor. All had been stabbed and shot many times, and Ms. Tate had been hung from a rafter.

A day later, the bodies of a grocery magnate, Leno LaBianca, and his wife, Rosemary, were found in their Los Angeles home. They had been killed in ferocious attacks that left little doubt they had been slain by the same people who killed Ms. Tate and her companions.

Within months, Mr. Manson and four followers were arrested and implicated by Linda Kasabian, an accomplice who admitted her role in the crimes. Ms. Kasabian was granted immunity and became the state's star witness in a trial that began in July 1970 and lasted six months. (Charles Watson, a cult member who joined in the killings, was committed to a mental institution and not tried with the others.)

Mr. Kanarek's courtroom tactics — a Niagara of objections, interruptions, shouting matches with the judge and witnesses, shoving incidents with two prosecutors and a scuffle with his client, who repeatedly tried to fire him — made him an outcast in some legal circles, but in others an exemplar of legal tenacity. He was jailed twice for contempt of court and vilified by much of the press and public.

The state called 84 witnesses and adduced that Mr. Manson, hoping to trigger an apocalyptic race war in America, had planned and ordered the killings, which were executed by his co-defendants, Susan Atkins, Leslie Van Houten and Patricia Krenwinkel, and by Mr. Watson. The defense rested without calling a single witness because, Mr. Kanarek said, the three women wanted to confess on the stand to "save" Mr. Manson.

In 1971, all four defendants were convicted of murder and conspiracy and sentenced to die in the gas chamber. Mr. Kanarek scoffed at the rulings and the trial.

"It was entertainment for the public," he said.

A year later, when California's death penalty was temporarily invalidated, the sentences were commuted to life in prison. Mr. Manson was never released. He died in 2017 at 83.

Mr. Manson's crimes generated books, plays, television dramas, documentaries and feature films — most recently Quentin Tarantino's Oscar-nominated "Once Upon a Time ... in Hollywood." After the trial, Mr. Kanarek prospered for a few years, but he never again made national headlines.

In 1989, he was arrested on a charge of disorderly conduct and hospitalized for a psychiatric evaluation. In 1990, he lost his law license over unpaid debts. He later lived in motel rooms.

Irving Allen Kanarek was born in Seattle on May 12, 1920, to Meyer and Beatrice (Prupis) Kanarek. His father was an insurance salesman.

Irving and his sister, Zillah, grew up in Seattle and attended Garfield High School. Irving graduated from the University of Washington in 1941 with a chemistry degree.

In the 1940s and early '50s, he was an engineer for North American Aviation, working on aerospace projects in California, and held a patent for work on rocket fuels. After losing his security clearance and his job, he won a suit for reinstatement and back pay.

But he had already decided on a new career. He earned a degree in 1956 at Loyola Law School and began his practice in 1957.

His marriage to Sally Nava ended in divorce. He is survived by their two daughters, Irvina and Walesa Kanarek.

Long retired from law practice, Mr. Kanarek in recent years had resided at an assisted-living facility in Garden Grove.