

Claus von Bülow, convicted and then acquitted of trying to kill his millionaire wife, dies at 92

By Paul W. Valentine

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Claus von Bülow, the debonair Danish-born socialite whose conviction and then acquittal for attempting to murder his millionaire wife riveted the nation in the 1980s during two sensational courtroom dramas, died May 25 at his home in London. He was 92.

His son-in-law, Riccardo Pavoncelli, confirmed the death but did not cite a specific cause.

The televised trials, with their allusions to money, power and infidelity in high places, swung open a not entirely welcome window into the exclusive world of Newport, R.I., where the von Bülows lived in palatial splendor among the resort town's wealthy residents.

Centrally visible in the daily courthouse scene was the tall, meticulously tailored Mr. von Bülow — accused of plotting the death of his beautiful but erratic wife, Sunny, in their seaside mansion bedroom to inherit her millions and marry his mistress, a soap opera actress waiting in the wings.

Mr. von Bülow, known for his trenchant quips to journalists and others, became a fascinating figure on the evening news and near gavel-to-gavel cable TV coverage of the trials.

Once asked by a reporter in Newport how tall he was, Mr. von Bülow answered, smiling, “Six-foot-3 — plus my halo.”

In the first trial, in 1982, he was convicted of two counts of trying to trigger his wife's death by injecting her with insulin, leaving her twice in a coma. The first coma was brief; the second, almost a year later, became permanent.

His conviction was reversed on appeal, and Mr. von Bülow was acquitted in a second trial in 1985. A jury in Providence, R.I., spurned the insulin-injection theory in the face of new defense assertions that Sunny von Bülow's comas were self-induced by overindulgence in alcohol, prescription drugs and sugar-laden foods. She suffered severe hypoglycemia, a condition that can cause low blood sugar after ingesting sugary foods.

Sunny von Bülow died in 2008 at 76 in a private nursing home in New York after lying in a largely vegetative state for nearly 28 years.

The legal saga — involving a suspicious housemaid and a mysterious black bag containing drug paraphernalia — spawned TV specials and books, including a 1986 bestseller by Harvard Law School professor Alan M. Dershowitz, who represented Mr. von Bülow during the successful appeal.

A 1990 film version of the book, “Reversal of Fortune,” starred Jeremy Irons and Glenn Close as the von Bülow and earned Irons an Academy Award for best actor.

Mr. von Bülow later complained that Irons unfairly portrayed him as cold and aloof. “Now I am stuck with that reputation, no matter what,” he told the London Daily Telegraph in 2010.

In the years after his acquittal, Mr. von Bülow enjoyed something of a rise in the social scene in New York and later in London. Casting aside his customary double-breasted suits, he posed in a mod black leather jacket for fashion photographer Helmut Newton in Vanity Fair magazine in 1985.

In London, he hosted small dinners for artists, historians and assorted intellectuals and was voted the 46th “most invited” party guest in London by Tatler magazine in 2001.

Mr. von Bülow was born Claus Cecil Borberg on Aug. 11, 1926, in Copenhagen, son of Svend and Jonna Borberg. His father was a playwright and drama critic, his mother the daughter of Frits Bülow, a prominent financier and descendant of a German-Danish noble family.

His parents divorced when he was 4. As World War II approached and Germany occupied Denmark, his father’s work was positively received by the Nazi regime. His mother fled with young Claus to Sweden, then to England.

After the war, his father was convicted by a Danish court of collaborating with the Germans. He served 18 months of a four-year sentence but won an acquittal on appeal.

“He gave a good name to a bad cause,” Mr. von Bülow would say later.

In England, he took his mother’s maiden name, then added “von,” an honorific he said his grandfather had dropped. At 16, he entered the University of Cambridge in England, where he obtained a law degree with honors in 1946.

He worked in banking and law before the billionaire oil mogul J. Paul Getty hired him as a personal assistant in 1959.

In early 1966, he met his future wife, Martha Crawford, while she was visiting London. Called Sunny for her then-cheerful personality, she was heiress to the fortune of her father, Pittsburgh utilities magnate George Crawford, and had just come off a failed marriage with an impoverished Austrian prince, Alfred “Alfie” von Auersperg.

With her two children, Annie-Laurie and Alexander, she returned to New York. On June 6, 1966, she married Mr. von Bülow, and the couple moved into her 14-room apartment on Fifth Avenue. A year later, their daughter and only child, Cosima, was born.

By 1968, Mr. von Bülow dropped his job with Getty. While he was moderately well off in his own right, he began living more fully on his wife’s wealth.

In 1970, the couple bought Clarendon Court, an 11-acre estate in Newport and scene of the alleged murder attempts a decade later.

Cracks were already showing in the marriage. Shortly after Cosima's birth, Mr. von Bülow said, his wife lost interest in sex, leading him to extramarital affairs. While he was a charming and urbane guest at Newport's extravagant galas, she became increasingly reclusive. She sank into depression and bouts of drinking, according to Mr. von Bülow and others, and the two began discussing divorce.

On Dec. 27, 1979, Sunny von Bülow fell into a coma, but she recovered after six hours. Almost a year later, on Dec. 21, 1980, she lapsed into a coma again. She never regained consciousness.

Suspicion began focusing on Mr. von Bülow when Sunny von Bülow's longtime personal maid and friend, Maria Schrallhammer, told private investigators that Mr. von Bülow was slow to call a doctor for the first coma despite Schrallhammer's pleas. She also said she discovered an insulin-tinged hypodermic needle and other drugs in a black bag in his closet.

The investigators, hired by Mr. von Bülow's stepchildren, turned the evidence over to state prosecutors, who charged him with two counts of attempted murder. The stepchildren's actions caused a split with Cosima, who sided with her father and was disinherited by her maternal grandmother.

At Mr. von Bülow's trial in 1982, his former paramour, the Swedish-born actress Alexandra Isles, testified that she had given him a deadline to divorce his wife shortly before the first coma.

Prosecutors contended he injected her with what he thought would be a fatal dose of insulin, freeing him to marry Isles while avoiding losing access to her fortune, estimated then at \$75 million to \$100 million.

A Newport jury convicted him of two counts of attempted murder, and he was sentenced to 30 years in prison. Free on \$100,000 bond, Mr. von Bülow hired Dershowitz to appeal the conviction.

"I tried very hard not to like him," Dershowitz once said, according to the Express newspaper. "I don't like basically what he stands for and his lifestyle, but it turned out that he is a very funny man and a very warm man despite his austere external appearance."

Dershowitz recruited a covey of law students to research and challenge the case, a focal point of "Reversal of Fortune."

In 1984, the Rhode Island Supreme Court voided the conviction, ruling that the evidence against Mr. von Bülow had been gathered without a search warrant and the defense had been improperly denied access to a family attorney's notes.

At a new trial, Mr. von Bülow's defense was led by Thomas P. Puccio, the hard-charging federal prosecutor in the 1970s Abscam sting operation that led to bribery convictions of seven members of Congress.

Puccio pitted eight medical experts against the state prosecutors, arguing that Sunny von Bülow's comas were induced not by insulin but by overconsumption of alcohol and prescription drugs and chronically deteriorating health.

Importantly, experts testified that insulin found on the hypodermic needle in the black bag could not be residue from an injection because human skin acts as a swab and wipes a needle clean upon withdrawal.

Throughout the trial, Mr. von Bülow's new love interest, Hungarian-born triple-divorcee socialite Andrea Reynolds, was by his side.

On June 10, 1985, the jury acquitted Mr. von Bülow of both counts of attempted murder.

His relationship with Reynolds ended. "It had become less and less romantic," she told People magazine. "But it would have looked pretty bad if I had walked out earlier — like I thought he was guilty, which I never did."

Undeterred, his stepchildren pursued Mr. von Bülow in civil court with a \$56 million lawsuit. That action was settled without trial in 1987 when Mr. von Bülow agreed to divorce his comatose wife, abandon claims to her fortune and leave the country. He moved to London.

"Moving to England was a very, very smart thing for him to do," Dershowitz once told the Daily Telegraph. "In Great Britain, Claus is regarded as a victim of a false accusation. In the U.S., opinion is certainly more divided."

Mr. von Bülow also gave up rights to write books or otherwise benefit by publicizing the case. In addition, Cosima, who married Pavoncelli, an Italian financier, in 1996, regained a one-third share of her grandmother's estate. Besides Cosima, survivors include several grandchildren.

In London, Mr. von Bülow continued to enjoy an active social life. He wrote theater and book reviews and lived in what London newspapers called a posh bachelor pad. A Catholic, he attended Mass weekly.

During a gathering, he met historian Anne Somerset, who had written a book on poisonings in the court of King Louis XIV of France. The droll Mr. von Bülow reportedly told her, "I must read that: People always think it's my special subject."

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