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Suspect in museum fire has history of hate, arson

By Fred Kelly
fred.kelly@indystar.com
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The primary suspect in a fire that destroyed a Holocaust museum in Terre Haute once was accused of threatening President Bush and told acquaintances he was prepared to kill Jews to protect his race, prosecutors said Monday.

During a hearing in U.S. District Court in Indianapolis, prosecutors described Joseph Charles Stockett, 57, as a Nazi-sympathizer who has burned down abortion clinics and has been investigated for allegedly threatening then-Vice President Dan Quayle.

A Nov. 18 arson destroyed the CANDLES museum in Terre Haute. The museum, established by a Holocaust survivor, is dedicated to the children who survived medical experiments performed on them while being detained in Nazi concentration camps during World War II.

Stockett acknowledges that he is anti-Semitic but denies that he set the museum fire.

His unpopular views have unfairly made him a target in the investigation, said James McKinley, his public defender.

U.S. Magistrate Kennard Foster ruled that Stockett must remain in jail while he awaits trial on unrelated gun charges. No trial date was set.

Federal authorities arrested him recently after an informant told a Terre Haute police officer he thought he knew who torched the museum.

The informer sold Stockett a 9 mm handgun during a recorded undercover sting. Stockett was later arrested and charged with being a felon in possession of a firearm.

"At a certain point, the right to free speech is not absolute," Foster said. "If anyone does not need a gun, it is this gentleman."

Officials from the U.S. attorney's office would not say why they have not yet charged him with arson in connection with the museum fire.

When asked whether he believed that Stockett set fire to the museum, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms Agent Michael Vergon said, "Read between the lines."



Officials from the U.S. attorney's office would not say why they have not yet charged Joseph Stockett (right) in connection with a Nov. 18 fire that destroyed a Holocaust museum in Terre Haute. -- Joseph C. Garza / Associated Press

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Investigators allege that while he was trying to sell the informer a used car in exchange for the gun, Stockett said, "This struggle to save my race from the Jews might require me to kill someone someday."

Stockett has long had trouble with the law.

In 1976, he was convicted of setting fire to a Planned Parenthood office in Oregon. At the time, authorities said, Stockett suffered from schizophrenia.

He also has been a suspect in a number of other abortion clinic fires, Assistant U.S. Attorney Joe Vaughn said.

In 1988, Stockett was charged in Washington, D.C., with disorderly conduct for allegedly making threats against Quayle during a political demonstration for the homeless.

Since 1992, Stockett has lived in 18 different towns, where he would speak to anyone who would listen to his rhetoric about Jews and his anti-war stance.

The U.S. Secret Service investigated Stockett last year for alleged threats against President Bush during a speech in Champaign, Ill.

The investigation did not result in criminal charges.

Authorities believe there is evidence to indicate Stockett set the museum fire. A short time before the blaze, a surveillance camera on a neighboring store captured a light-colored car driving away from the museum. The vehicle matched the description of Stockett's car.

The 21-year-old informant told police that Stockett was trying to recruit members for an anti-Jewish group.

McKinley denied that his client belongs to any such organization, saying, "He is not a neo-Nazi."

He noted that Stockett helped on Jesse Jackson's 1988 presidential campaign, once was married to a black woman and was an activist for the homeless.

Having grown up mostly in California as the son of a minister, Stockett claims he was physically abused. While his six brothers and sisters are business professionals and ministers, Stockett is a pauper.

He collects disability but had remained homeless until moving into a Terre Haute apartment in October.

He previously slept in a lawn mower shed, a tent and a van, McKinley said.

In July, Stockett moved to Terre Haute from Illinois by riding a bike.

Call Star reporter Fred Kelly at 1-317-444-6491.