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Analysis of 911 tape revives questions about man's death

By MATTHEW DOIG
matthew.doig@heraldtribune.com

One of the nation's top forensic audio specialists said he can hear a man ask for an ambulance in the background of a 911 call, even though the only man in the room at the time was supposed to be dead.

The report by Paul Ginsberg, who was hired by the Herald-Tribune to analyze the call, casts new doubt on the official version of Murray Cohen's Jan. 13, 2003, death.

Investigators ruled that Cohen, who was 71 and had heart problems, died of natural causes. His 50-year-old wife, Maria Cohen, told Sarasota County sheriff's investigators that her husband never woke up from his afternoon nap.

Days later, Cohen's son told investigators that Maria and his father had married a few weeks earlier, and he believed she murdered him for his million-dollar estate. A five-month investigation cleared Maria Cohen and turned up no evidence that her husband had been murdered.

But Ginsberg's latest findings give Steve Esdale, Murray Cohen's son, more ammunition in his nearly three-year effort to prove that his father's death wasn't natural.



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COURTESY PHOTO

Investigators ruled that Murray Cohen, shown with his wife, Maria, died of natural causes in January 2003. But for nearly three years Cohen's son, Steve Esdale, has tried to prove that his father's death in Sarasota County was not natural.

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"I can say that there are questions that need to be answered," Ginsberg said. "This doesn't appear to be an open-and-shut case where his father had expired before the 911 call."

With the same techniques he used to transcribe secret FBI recordings from the U.S. government's Waco standoff, Ginsberg enhanced the background noises picked up by the 911 recording system.

He said he can hear a male voice in the background asking, "Didn't you call for an ambulance?" and "You had said you would get an ambulance." He also hears the same voice state, "I should beat you up" and the female caller yelling "Give up."

When the man speaks on the tape, Maria Cohen has already told the 911 operator that her husband is completely unresponsive, not breathing and "totally gone."

Sheriff's spokesman Chuck Lesaltato said Sheriff Bill Balkwill was interested in the new information but would withhold comment until he reviewed a copy of Ginsberg's report.

Maria Cohen's attorney, Steven Chase, said Cohen was unavailable for comment.

"We have no reason to believe that our client had any involvement in the death of Murray Cohen," said Chase, an attorney with the law firm Abel Band.

When the Herald-Tribune presented Esdale with Ginsberg's results, he said "Thank God" and then became too emotional to speak.

Esdale has long claimed that the 911 tape is the smoking gun that could

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... could prove his father was murdered.

Based on Esdale's claim about the tape, Balkwill said he ordered a new investigation into Cohen's death in June 2003. Investigators dismissed Esdale's claim after the FBI reported that the unidentified voice was likely just a television or chatter at the 911 call center.

But the official review of the tape has been flawed from the start because it relied on a substandard copy of the 911 call.

According to Lesaltato, the tape reviewed by the FBI was an analog cassette copy of the 911 recording. When the Herald-Tribune hired Ginsberg to analyze the 911 call, he insisted on a digital copy to reduce noises commonly picked up by analog cassette recorders.

"In other words, I got a better copy than the bureau got," Ginsberg said. "A digital copy, made properly, is a noise-free copy of the original."

Ginsberg says he's certain the male voice came from the caller's end because of the clarity, frequency and sound spectrum of the voice. He added that the female caller appeared to respond to the male voice.

Ginsberg said the analog copy analyzed by the FBI would have made it more difficult to accurately transcribe barely audible conversation, or



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even determine which end of the call the noises came from.

An FBI spokeswoman declined to comment on why the FBI did not ask the Sarasota County Sheriff's Office for a digital copy of the 911 call.

Ginsberg's latest findings are the result of his second review of the Cohen 911 call at the Herald-Tribune's request.

He first reviewed a copy of the call in May and reported that he didn't hear any voices in the background. The Herald-Tribune published those results in June.

But the newspaper later determined that his analysis needed to be redone because it -- like the FBI analysis -- relied on a low-quality copy of the 911 tape.

The Sheriff's Office admitted it gave the newspaper the wrong version of the 911 call and blamed the error on a misunderstanding.

Ginsberg's latest analysis confirms parts of what GaideCom, a forensic audio company hired by Esdale, found in December 2003. Its experts provided a more extensive transcript of what they believed the man could be heard saying.

Ginsberg could not hear large portions of what GaideCom claimed to hear, but key statements were similar.

GaideCom's version was easier for law enforcement officials to dismiss because Esdale paid for the analysis and the

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... company doesn't have
Ginsberg's national reputation.

Ginsberg has more than 30 years of forensic audio experience. The FBI and CIA have tapped him for their most difficult projects, including cases involving organized crime and terrorism.

On June 12, the Herald-Tribune published a lengthy story titled "A father's death, a son's obsession" detailing Esdale's relentless effort to prove that his father had been murdered.

The story highlighted suspicious circumstances regarding Cohen's death and the resulting investigation. Among them:

The Sheriff's Office waited nearly a year before getting the FBI to determine what the background voices on the 911 recording were.

Maria Cohen, a trained nurse who knew CPR, asked the 911 dispatcher for CPR instructions.

Investigators found a cardiovascular stimulant called Corazol in Cohen's house the day he died. The drug, which is made in Bulgaria, is used in eastern European labs to cause seizures in rats, has no direct



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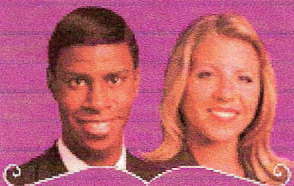
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Since the Herald-Tribune published its story about Cohen's death, Esdale has repeatedly accused the newspaper and Ginsberg of being part of a broad conspiracy to conceal his father's murder.

Last month, Ginsberg said he was forced to call law enforcement officials because Esdale left him a series of virulent phone messages.

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