



A father's death, a son's obsession

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Murray Cohen's death certificate should be collecting dust in Sarasota's vital records office. And it would be, if his 45-year-old son had not spent the past two years trying to prove that a former Bolivian narcotics officer married and murdered Cohen for his money.

Nothing seemed unusual about Murray Cohen. Except that he was dead.

His doctor would later say Cohen had been lucky to live as long as he did. He was 71 years old, and it appeared obvious that 60 extra pounds and a diseased heart had finally done him in.

So when investigators arrived at his Siesta Key home on Jan. 13, 2003, they ruled Cohen's death natural, gave his body a perfunctory examination, shipped him to a local funeral home and allowed embalming fluid to pickle any evidence into oblivion.

Today, Cohen's death certificate should be collecting dust in Sarasota's vital records office. And it would be, if his 45-year-old son had not spent the past two years trying to prove that a former Bolivian narcotics officer married and murdered Cohen for his money.

Steve Esdale's relentless pursuit of this theory has cost him almost everything. He has spent so much money -- more than \$150,000, he says -- that he struggles to pay his bills. His landlord evicted him, his wife and their 13-year-old son from their Weston home last month.

Esdale's persistence has prompted the Sarasota County Sheriff's Office to re-examine Cohen's death at least four times and tap FBI experts to review

evidence. Each time, the conclusion has been the same: Cohen died of natural causes.

None of it has gotten Esdale to stop.

Instead, he beefs up his list of suspects anytime a person or agency endorses the idea that Cohen died peacefully in his sleep. His list of conspirators now includes the FBI, U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, Sarasota County Sheriff Bill Balkwill, Gov. Jeb Bush and the Sarasota Herald-Tribune.

He believes that if a judge allows exhumation and an autopsy of his father's corpse, the entire conspiracy will unravel. Unless, as Esdale suspects, "they" already have swapped Cohen's body with that of a dead homeless person.

These days, some of the people who at one time were willing to consider Esdale's murder allegations now just consider him "mentally unstable," as a Florida Department of Law Enforcement report put it.

The medical examiner installed video surveillance equipment because Esdale's rants sounded increasingly threatening. A judge sanctioned Esdale for his deliberate disregard of the court's authority. And the Sheriff's Office pursued harassment charges against him for, among other reasons, telling a detective to "stick your gun up your ass and pull the trigger."

"He's accusing us of a cover-up, which is totally uncalled for," Sheriff Balkwill told the Herald-Tribune. "I think he's frustrated."

There is no overwhelming piece of evidence that suggests Cohen was murdered, and many of Esdale's claims can be dismissed with a logical explanation.

But among all of his wild theories are inconsistencies he has exposed that make it difficult -- even for some of the targets of his tirades -- to dismiss him entirely.

Esdale has documents that show Cohen's blood may have disappeared from the medical examiner's office. He proved that a sheriff's investigator ignored a critical piece of evidence for months. He learned that his father died next to a woman who had medical training but needed instructions to perform CPR. And he says he has an audio recording of Murray Cohen cursing his killer the day he died.

And then there is the Corazol.

The official version

Murray Cohen met Maria Amurrio through a mutual acquaintance, one of Cohen's ex-girlfriends. He was almost 70 and carried a belly that resembled a cauldron more than a pot. She was vibrant, not quite 50 and looked more like a Desperate Housewife than a Golden Girl.

Bill Nies said his friend, Murray, adored Maria because he had never had much luck with women.

"He was star struck by her," Nies said.

In December 2002, about two years after they met, Murray and Maria flew to her native country, Bolivia, and married in the capital city, La Paz.

Less than a month later, Maria found him dead in their bedroom.

Despite a spate of lingering questions, Maria's account of her husband's final hours, spelled out in investigative documents and videotaped depositions from her estate battle with Esdale, is not disputed by law enforcement.

Maria declined to be interviewed for this story.

Maria, whose résumé includes stints as a Bolivian narcotics agent, Calvin Klein's chef and the owner of a custom jewelry shop, spent the afternoon organizing her jewelry in a closet. Murray, a retired salesman, plumbing contractor and Korean War vet, shuffled paperwork while he waited for a call from his financial adviser later in the day.

The newlyweds broke away from their work and shared a bite to eat before lying down for an afternoon nap at 4:30.

It was the last time Maria saw Murray alive.

About an hour later, a ringing phone pulled Maria from her nap. She slipped into the kitchen to answer the phone so she wouldn't wake her husband.

The caller said he had an appointment to speak with Murray, so Maria went

back into the bedroom to wake him.

But her calls went unanswered.

She noticed Murray wasn't breathing, his forehead was purple and he was completely lifeless. Maria hung up the phone and called 911.

Her efforts to breathe life back into her husband failed; paramedics could not save him either.

He was pronounced dead at 6:05 p.m.

Suspicious

Two days later, an uncle phoned Steve Esdale to see how he was coping with the loss of his father.

The question shocked Esdale, who had not even heard he was dead.

He wondered why Maria hadn't called him immediately.

When his father first started dating Maria, Esdale said, he was proud that his old man was romancing a woman almost 25 years his junior.

Now, he is convinced it cost him his life.

Esdale called the Sarasota Sheriff's Office with his concerns and quickly convinced detectives that his father's death deserved a closer look.

He said the two had been married less than three weeks, and the union deserved scrutiny because of Maria's youth and his father's wealth.

Esdale told investigators that he believed Maria murdered his father for his money, a million-dollar estate that included a three-bedroom home on Siesta Key.

It was enough to convince sheriff's investigators to retrace their steps. But by then, it may have been too late.

To prepare his body to be shipped to New Jersey for burial, the funeral home embalmed Cohen, replacing his blood with preserving chemicals.

Investigators tested Cohen's eye fluid for common poisons, but the embalming fluid may have spoiled their chance of finding anything, said Dr. Russell Vega, who became Sarasota County's medical examiner a few months after Cohen died.

The surest way to determine Cohen's cause of death would have been an autopsy. Maria wouldn't consent to Esdale's request for one, and the former medical examiner chose not to overrule her decision.

"Looking back, I wish that an autopsy had been performed," Vega said. "It could have eliminated some of the questions in this case, even though I'm really certain many of those questions have been adequately answered."

Esdale blames Vega for helping the Sheriff's Office conceal his father's murder. He cites records that show the medical examiner's office drew 20 milliliters of his father's blood shortly after his death.

That blood is now missing and was never tested for poisons, even though blood is considered more reliable than eye fluid.

Vega said he has looked for the vials of blood and found nothing. He said Cohen's blood probably was never drawn and the records are a mistake.

"I think it's a lie," Esdale said. "I think he's covering up for what really happened there."

While Vega admits there are odd discrepancies in the case, he dismisses Esdale's allegation that he has conspired to hide Cohen's murder.

"We're simply trying to do the best we can based on the cards we were dealt," Vega said. "And I feel like we've done that."

Unraveling a mystery

Limited by the lack of physical evidence, the medical examiner's office found nothing to prove that Cohen didn't die from natural causes. The Sheriff's Office concurred and closed the case as a natural death for the second time.

But Esdale couldn't shake the feeling that his father had been murdered and that Sarasota County officials were hampered by conspiracy, not circumstance.

Esdale said this isn't the first time he has found himself tangled up in a diabolical plot. In the late '90s, he was briefly jailed after spending years battling neighbors and Davie police officers who had "conspired to ruin my life," he said.

Esdale was vindicated once the feud ended in 2001. His lawyer successfully argued that Esdale had been wrongfully charged in an egging incident, and the City of Davie cut Esdale a check for \$25,000.

When he was mired in the dispute, Esdale said he would ask, "God, why are you doing this to me?"

"Now I know He was preparing me for this," Esdale said.

A self-described inventor and stay-at-home dad, Esdale had time to nurture an obsession.

He pored over every document related to his father's death. He saw every inconsistency, even something as minor as a misspelled name, as proof of the conspiracy.

Esdale said he has been pushed to uncover the truth by his father, who occasionally visits him in dreams. In one, Esdale said his father walked up to him and showed him that his palms were dirty.

After the dream, Esdale obtained death-scene photos from the Sheriff's Office, and his father's palms appear dirty in the photos. If he had been napping, as Maria claimed, Esdale wondered why his father would have gone to bed without washing his hands.

"I'm not some Ouija-board cuckoo-head," Esdale said, but he concluded that his father's spirit must be helping him uncover the truth.

Esdale said his suspicions were justified after he used his father's phone records to track down Stephen Beninati, a New York financial consultant who called the Cohen house shortly before Maria called 911.

"He was relieved when I called," Esdale said. "When he heard that my dad had died the day he called, he said that phone call really bothered him."

Esdale asked Beninati to sign a notarized statement after hearing his recollection

of the call. According to the letter, Beninati said "it seemed like I had called during a domestic argument."

He said he heard a woman screaming and "a male voice screaming in the background." When he called back two minutes later, the woman was sobbing and he "also heard the same male voice, hysterical screaming in the background."

As Esdale cobbled together evidence to support his murder theory, he thought Maria's undoing might be the copy of her call to 911 the night her husband died.

The following are condensed portions of what Esdale heard.

The 911 call

Operator: 911 ... what's your location?

Maria Cohen: Oh please listen, an ambulance to my house. My husband is having a heart attack. Please (crying) please.

...

Operator: You're gonna calm down for me, okay? Your husband's unconscious?

Maria: Yes (crying).

Operator: Okay.

Maria: Hurry up (crying).

Operator: Is he breathing?

Maria: (Crying) Aah, no.

...

Operator: Okay, do you wanna perform CPR?

Maria: (Crying) ... Tell me what to do ...

Operator: Okay. I'm gonna give you instructions, we're going to go ahead and do CPR, okay?

Maria: Yes (crying).

Operator: Okay.

Background noises.

Operator: Okay, is he completely awake now, or no?

Maria: No (crying). He's totally gone (crying).

...

Operator: Okay. I need you'll ... can you get him to the floor?

Maria: He's very heavy. I will try.

Operator: Okay, try. If you need to, push him on to the floor.

Maria: Ah, ah, one moment.

Background noises.

Maria: Okay, I got him on the floor.

...

Operator: Okay. I'm going to tell you how to give mouth to mouth. Okay? Take a couple breaths, okay? We'll ... we can do this. Okay?

Maria: Okay, one moment.

Background noises.

Operator: Ma'am?

Background noises.

Operator: Ma'am?

Background noises.

Operator: Ma'am?

BACKGROUND NOISES.

Maria: Okay.

Operator: Ma'am, what, what were you doing?

Maria: We were sleeping -- taking a siesta (crying).

Operator: You were what?

Maria: We were sleep, we were just sleeping.

Operator: Okay, no, ah, what were you doing? Okay, I'm going to give you instructions on how to give him breaths, okay?

Maria: Okay.

The investigation

Esdale played the call over and over trying to identify sounds he heard over a tape hiss that masked much of the background noise.

He thought that some of the noises sounded like a man and a woman arguing. He swore he could make out his father's voice faintly over the static.

Even the bad copy couldn't hide the apparent confusion of the 911 operator, who seemed puzzled by Maria's behavior.

Esdale thinks the operator heard his father's cries for help after Maria told her that Murray was unconscious and "totally gone."

The operator pressed Maria about what she'd been doing after Maria seemed to walk away from the phone before getting CPR instructions, Esdale said.

Esdale presented the evidence he'd uncovered to Sarasota County sheriff's officials. Sheriff Balkwill, who had a face-to-face meeting with Esdale, told the Herald-Tribune that Esdale's suspicions about the 911 call convinced him that the case should be reinvestigated.

"The only reason I did it was because of what he said about the tape," Balkwill said. "But I told him, 'No promises.'"

Detective Chris Hallisey, considered one of Balkwill's best investigators, was assigned to the case in July 2003. It was the second time the case had been reopened.

Esdale shared his theories with Hallisey and asked him to give special attention to the 911 tape, Beninati's phone call and his father's dirty hands.

He also fed Hallisey information that he'd learned about Maria during their court battle over Cohen's estate.

Esdale told Hallisey that Maria graduated from a New York nursing school in the 1980s. Prior to that, she had been a top police official in Bolivia and worked as a narcotics agent.

Esdale wondered why a woman with medical training needed CPR instructions, and he believed her narcotics background would give her the expertise to pick a hard-to-detect poison.

Hallisey checked into some of the information that Esdale shared with him. But more often than not, the detective stopped short of getting concrete answers.

Hallisey talked to Beninati, but his report doesn't address the financial analyst's assertion that he had heard a man screaming at the same time Cohen was supposedly unconscious.

He also never interviewed the 911 operator who took Maria's call. And he chose not to interview Maria because her lawyers agreed only to accept written questions.

If Hallisey ever determined her CPR capabilities, it's not revealed in his 12-page report.

Most disturbing to Esdale was that Hallisey didn't try to have the 911 recording enhanced before he closed the case and again declared Cohen's death natural.

Hallisey's investigation actually raised more doubts about Esdale than it did about Maria.

His report states that Murray's cousin said the relationship between Esdale and Murray was strained. He noted that Maria stated in a deposition for the estate

case that Esdale had once reduced Murray to tears because his son only called when he wanted to borrow money.

And during the course of the investigation, Esdale hounded the detective with imaginative but unsubstantiated theories about how Maria could have murdered his father.

Five months after he began his investigation, Hallisey called Esdale and told him he'd found nothing to implicate Maria.

It infuriated Esdale that Hallisey's investigation made it look like he and his father had a rocky relationship. He pointed out that Murray always included him as a significant beneficiary in his will, unlike Esdale's younger brother who was left nothing.

Esdale accuses Hallisey of covering up for Maria because of her ties to law enforcement.

Maria now works for the Florida Department of Corrections as a juvenile probation officer in Sarasota. In her state employment file, Maria claims that she worked with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration while she was a Bolivian law enforcement officer.

Maria's attorney, who works for the law firm Abel Band, laughed off Esdale's conspiracy theory.

"I will not dignify the allegations that Mr. Esdale has continually made," attorney Steven Chase said. "He has lost all proceedings and motions he's ever made."

The voices

Unfazed by Hallisey's decision to ignore the 911 call, Esdale pushed ahead with his own investigation.

In November 2003, a month after Hallisey closed his case, Esdale hired GaideCom, a New York communications company that has worked for law enforcement, to enhance the background noises in Maria's 911 call. GaideCom does not specialize in forensic audio analysis, but Susan Gaide, the company's president, said she and her partner are trained musicians who can hear what

others can't.

The GaideCom transcript, which has been disputed by the FBI and a top forensic audio expert hired by the Herald-Tribune, convinced Esdale that he had unmasked his father's murderer.

Esdale read how Murray begged Maria for help, then cursed her when he realized she wanted him dead. Maria screamed at Murray to hurry up and die, according to the transcript.

The following are excerpts of the GaideCom transcript, which have been edited for brevity. GaideCom's enhancements of the background noise are in bold type. The entire transcript and the audio of the call is available at heraldtribune.com.

Operator: Okay, do you wanna perform CPR?

Caller: (Crying) ... Tell me what to do ...

Male voice: Get me help. Get me help. Hurry up.

Operator: Okay. I'm gonna give you instructions, we're going to go ahead and do CPR, okay?

Caller: Yes (crying).

Operator: Okay.

Male voice: Please get me a doctor. Get me a doctor. I'm sick.

Operator: Okay, is he completely awake now, or no?

Caller: No (crying). He's totally gone (crying).

Male voice: Help me.

...

Operator: Okay. I need you'll ... can you get him to the floor?

Caller: He's very heavy. I will try.

Operator: Okay, try. If you need to, push him on to the floor.

Caller: Ah, ah, one moment.

Male voice: Didn't you call for an ambulance?

Caller: Yes.

Male voice: You had said you were gonna get an ambulance. That's what you said to me.

Caller: Yes.

Male voice: ... I can't stand ... a heart attack.

Caller: Okay, I got him on the floor.

...

Operator: Okay. I'm going to tell you how to give mouth to mouth. Okay? Take a couple breaths, okay? We'll ... we can do this. Okay?

Caller: Okay, one moment.

Male voice: I should beat you up.

Caller: I love you, baby.

Operator: Ma'am?

Caller: When are you gonna give it up?

Operator: Ma'am?

Male voice: You're a bitch, bitch.

Operator: Ma'am?

Caller: Give up. Come on!

Caller: Okay.

Operator: Ma'am, what, what were you doing?

Caller: We were sleeping -- taking a siesta (crying).

Operator: You were what?

Caller: We were sleep, we were just sleeping.

Operator: Okay, no, ah, what were you doing? Okay, I'm going to give you instructions on how to give him breaths, okay?

Caller: Okay.

(Operator gives CPR instructions).

Male voice: You want me dead.

Finally analyzed

Esdale faxed the GaideCom transcript and a note to the Sarasota medical examiner's office in December 2003.

"Sarasota Sherrifs (sic) are covering up the fact that my dad was murderd (sic)," Esdale wrote. "Your office has been fooled by the murder (sic) and the police. I expect your office to do the right thing."

According to his investigative report, Hallisey received a copy of the GaideCom transcript and acknowledged that when he listened to the tape, he heard a male voice state, "I should beat you up."

Hallisey played the tape for the manager of the 911 communications center. She said the male voice in the background was probably a voice from the 911 center that got picked up during the call.

Hallisey agreed but decided to have the FBI analyze the tape.

In March 2004, Hallisey closed the Cohen case again with the same conclusion. He wrote in his investigative summary that the FBI was "unable to identify a third party on the 911 tape."

But Esdale later discovered that Hallisey had closed the case without having the FBI test the tape.

Hallisey sent the tape to the FBI twice in early 2004. Both times, he expected an answer to the male voice mystery, but all he got were enhanced versions of the

recording.

Hallisey didn't get a definitive answer about the extra voices until a Fox news reporter started asking questions about the case in spring 2004. That prompted Hallisey to send yet another copy to the FBI and insist they provide an analysis.

In a court hearing related to Esdale's fight to win his father's estate, Hallisey admitted that media pressure was the only reason he sent the tape to the FBI for the third time.

Contrary to Hallisey's original report, the FBI analysis acknowledged that there were more than two voices on the tape. But the FBI's audio expert determined that the voices were probably from the 911 call center, or a TV or radio broadcast in the Cohen house.

The Herald-Tribune hired nationally recognized audio expert Paul Ginsberg and asked him to analyze Maria's 911 call and review GaideCom's findings. Ginsberg, the president of Pro Audio Laboratories in New York, has more than 30 years of forensic audio experience and has worked on high profile projects ranging from the Waco standoff to terrorism trials.

Ginsberg said Murray can't be heard on the tape and questioned GaideCom's analysis. The words they attribute to Murray aren't on the tape, he said.

"I'm puzzled that with my experience and my equipment, they could hear so much more than I did," Ginsberg said.

Ginsberg said he did hear a male voice, the one that GaideCom claims states, "I should beat you up." But Ginsberg said it was impossible to determine exactly what was said and that the voice might be another operator at the 911 center.

Ginsberg also said the background statements made by Maria can't be as clearly understood as GaideCom claims.

Susan Gaide said she stands by her analysis.

"Everybody has a different set of ears. Everybody has different equipment," she said. "I have the ultimate respect for Paul, but I don't know how he could not hear it."

When told of Ginsberg's results, Esdale said it was obvious that "somebody got to him."

"That's all it could be," Esdale said. "The FBI has definitely spoken to him and said, 'Shut it down.'"

The Bulgarian drug

Just when it seemed like the momentum behind Esdale's conspiracy campaign had dried up, he found something to revive the case once more.

This spring, he picked through a stack of evidence and reviewed the list of drugs that investigators had inventoried the day his father died.

He had never heard of Corazol, one of about a dozen drugs found at the Cohens' Siesta Key residence. And he had no idea why his father would need the drug, which is made in Bulgaria.

The information he uncovered gave him yet another reason to reject the idea that a natural heart attack killed Cohen.

Unlike the other medications, Corazol couldn't remedy Cohen's heart condition, kill his pain or improve his sex life.

Sarasota Medical Examiner Vega said the drug itself seems to have no medical purpose and could cause a heart attack at a high enough dose.

From what he could determine, it's a cardiovascular stimulant used in eastern European labs to cause seizures in rats to test anti-epileptic drugs.

Corazol is so obscure that representatives of the Food and Drug Administration and Drug Enforcement Administration told the Herald-Tribune they didn't even have a record of its existence.

Though he considers it unlikely, Vega has never ruled out the possibility that an exotic poison could have killed Cohen. So when the rare drug was brought to his attention, Vega had Cohen's eye fluid re-tested in May to see if Corazol was present.

The results were negative, but Vega said there is no way to know how the

methanol in the embalming fluid affected the test.

"This is not as definitive a result as anybody would like to see," Vega said. "We're sort of where we were before."

Not Esdale, who says the Corazol is the final detail that proves what really happened to his father. He doesn't care that law enforcement officials don't support his theory, or that his scenario relies on imagination more than fact.

Esdale thinks his father was working out in the yard that afternoon. With his hands still dirty, Murray went to check the mail shortly before 5 p.m. He opened up an account statement and found out that Maria had added herself to one of his bank accounts.

Murray went inside and confronted Maria. They got into a heated argument, and Maria realized their relationship was over.

"She had to kill him," Esdale said. "So she poured him a cup of coffee with a mega-dose of the Corazol."

Esdale said Maria and his father continued to argue before the Corazol kicked in, and Beninati called during the fracas. When Murray finally succumbed to the drug, and Maria thought he was dead, she called 911.

But Maria underestimated how much Corazol was needed to kill a man as large as his father, Esdale said. Murray, groggy from the drug, came to during the call and spoke loud enough for the operator to hear him. Maria finished him off by suffocating him during the time she left the phone before getting CPR instructions, Esdale said.

Investigators don't buy it.

"Esdale's allegations have not been supported," Hallisey wrote in his investigative report. "After a thorough review of this case by the Sheriff's Office and the Medical Examiner's Office, Murray Cohen's death is regarded as natural."

Case closed?

Monday might be Esdale's last chance to convince a Sarasota judge that he deserves more time to prove his father was murdered and that Maria shouldn't

get Cohen's estate.

If he fails, Maria may get the estate and Esdale could be on the hook for more than \$100,000 of her attorney's fees.

It's questionable whether Esdale will attend the hearing with his lawyer because he fears investigators may try to silence him for good if he steps foot in Sarasota County.

"I am afraid of being pulled over, set up and tasered so I have a heart attack," Esdale said. "I'm not a chicken, but I am afraid."

He has hidden three copies of a videotape that will be released in the event he dies, he says. One copy is in California, one is in the Northeast and another is in Florida.

He said the tapes include details about his enemies, those who have conspired against him. If necessary, Esdale hopes the tapes can be used to get the justice he seeks, even if it's from beyond his grave.

"They hate me, man. They hate me because I didn't stop," Esdale said. "Until they find out what happened, my life is in danger."

Balkwill said Esdale has nothing to fear from his officers and he insists that there were no mistakes with the Cohen case. Asked to explain some of the unanswered questions from the investigation, Balkwill said, "You'd have to talk to Hallisey about that."

But he won't permit the Herald-Tribune to interview Hallisey or the 911 operator.

During an interview last month with the Herald-Tribune, an irritated Balkwill picked the Cohen case file off his desk.

"The case is closed. There is no evidence that there is a murder," Balkwill said. "My question is, why are you guys looking at this again?"