

# **Biofem Case: Focus Now on '80s Attache**

## **Crime: Three suspects in the Irvine murder conspiracy met at the home of the South African trade envoy in Beverly Hills. Germ warfare link was hinted.**

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By Jack Leonard and Jeff Gottlieb, Los Angeles Times

A series of meetings at the Beverly Hills home of a South African trade attache is now the focus of the probe into February's attempted murder of an Irvine drug company executive.

The meetings, which took place in the mid-1980s, are under scrutiny because investigators have discovered that all three named suspects in the Irvine shooting conspiracy attended them, police said.

In addition, the FBI, at the time, had become concerned enough about allegations that two of the suspects were involved in trying to supply South Africa with germ warfare materials that the agency monitored several of the suspects' meetings, according to sources close to the investigation.

Detectives aren't sure what role, if any, these meetings played in the plot against Biofem Inc. CEO James Patrick Riley, who is recovering from a gunshot wound in the face. But investigators expressed hope that the connections could help them solve a 4-month-old case that has yet to reveal either the gunman or a conclusive motive.

The events at the Beverly Hills compound--which ranged from gala celebrations attended by dozens of people to informal gatherings around a wood-paneled bar--represent the strongest link yet between the Irvine shooting suspects and South Africa's biological warfare program.

Dr. Larry C. Ford, who police say helped "mastermind" the plot to kill his Biofem Inc. business partner, has already been identified by several South African researchers as an advisor to the military program. Ford committed suicide days after a masked gunman wounded Riley.

FBI agents regularly inquired about Ford's and another doctor's frequent visits to the home of Gideon Bouwer, who was South Africa's trade attache at the time, according to friends of Bouwer's. Bouwer returned to South Africa in 1986 and, according to a spokesman for that nation's Department of Foreign Affairs, died in the early 1990s.

Two of the friends--Peter Fitzpatrick and Tom Byron--said they told the FBI that Bouwer often discussed acquiring biological weapons with the help of Ford and others.

There is no evidence that the discussion led to any weapons development, and the FBI never made any arrests.

But 14 years later, in the wake of the Biofem shooting, the FBI launched a "weapons of mass destruction" probe when it searched Ford's Irvine home and found germs that cause cholera and typhoid fever. Sources said federal agents are trying to determine if Ford kept the germs for biological warfare research.

Prosecutors have charged businessman Dino D'Saachs, 56, with conspiracy to commit murder, alleging that he drove the gunman to and from the shooting. D'Saachs has pleaded not guilty.

Detectives have twice questioned Orange County surgeon Jerry D. Nilsson and say he has been cooperative. In court documents, police named Nilsson as a suspect in the case but have not revealed how they believe he was involved in the plot.

Nilsson's attorney, Anthony P. Brooklier, said his client had nothing to do with the attempted murder of Riley.

Police said they have turned to events of 14 years ago in an effort to prove that the three suspects--Ford, D'Saachs and Nilsson--had previously consorted with one another.

Irvine investigators interviewed Fitzpatrick, Byron and others who visited Bouwer's house and learned that all three suspects were seen at the diplomat's home, police officials said.

"These people have been associated for years," said Irvine Police Det. Victor Ray.

Fitzpatrick and Byron said they met Ford during gatherings at Bouwer's Beverly Hills home. The trade attache hosted frequent parties, inviting U.S. businessmen he hoped could provide South Africa with military intelligence or supplies, despite an embargo, the two said.

Ford, the men said, was shy, rarely making small talk, but he was a regular visitor at the house.

Fitzpatrick and Byron said FBI agents approached them in late 1985. The two said they regularly told federal authorities about the activities of Bouwer, Ford and Nilsson until late 1986, when the trade attache returned to South Africa.

The surveillance came at the height of the U.S. arms embargo against South Africa and just as the apartheid-era regime was developing a covert biological warfare program.

Fitzpatrick and Byron said they told federal authorities about a 1986 meeting at Bouwer's home that included Ford, Nilsson and a high-ranking South African official involved in the nation's biological weapons program. Bouwer bragged that Nilsson and Ford were supplying the official with germ warfare materials, Fitzpatrick and Byron said.

Irvine detectives and an FBI spokesman declined to comment on the federal probe of Bouwer's activities. But a law enforcement source familiar with the investigation said agents were unable to prove allegations of embargo-busting.

"They never could substantiate a thing on Ford and Nilsson," said the source, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "They never got anything they could sink their teeth into."

The South African foreign affairs spokesman said consular officials never heard of allegations

involving Bouwer and biological weapons.

The extent of Ford's relationship with South Africa's covert biological warfare program--code-named Project Coast--remains unclear.

Two South African researchers said earlier this year that Ford lectured scientists on how to lace everyday items with biological agents.

But former South African Surgeon General Niel Knobel, who served as administrative head of the program, has said Ford's role was limited to providing informal consultation on protecting troops against biological attacks.

Knobel said he met Ford at Bouwer's Beverly Hills home once but maintained that Ford played no role in the development of biological weapons.