

Abbie Hoffman Committed Suicide Using Barbiturates, Autopsy Shows

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Abbie Hoffman, the clown prince of radical protest whose life and death seemed a synonym for the 1960's, committed suicide with a huge dose of barbiturates, a Pennsylvania coroner ruled yesterday.

Although friends and family knew that Mr. Hoffman, who was 52 years old, was a chronic manic depressive, most maintained to the last that he had the illness under control and even planned to write a book about it.

"He was a wonderful, life-loving man," said a longtime friend, David Fenton, a Washington public relations man who conceded he learned the tricks of the trade at Abbie Hoffman's knee, and had kept in touch with him even when he went underground in the 1970's.

"He was depressed, but he was nothing like manic depressives get when they bottom out," he said. "Abbie was incredibly aware of his illness and took notes on the symptoms for a book he was writing on the illness."

Life in 80's Irrelevant

But there was another view from a fellow defendant in the Chicago Seven conspiracy trial of 1969, Tom Hayden, who said that his onetime comrade in arms found life in the 80's irrelevant.

"He was really uncomfortable with becoming middle aged and facing old age without seeing significant social change," Mr. Hayden said in a telephone interview last night.

"He was a perennial youth, a juvenile delinquent with gray hair," Mr. Hayden added. "I have to think that perturbed him a lot. He was always trying to re-create the 60's and was deeply dismayed he was becoming a prophet in the wilderness of the 80's."

Whatever hope family members and friends may have had that Mr. Hoffman had died of natural causes appeared to dissolve yesterday with the ruling by Bucks County Coroner Thomas J. Rosko that the death was a suicide.

The coroner said Mr. Hoffman had died of "a massive overdose of the drug phenobarbital," combined with alcohol.

Died in His Sleep

"I think it is likely that he literally fell asleep and died in his sleep," Mr. Rosko said. Other than that, what occurred in his last hours is strictly speculation.

But a brother, Jack Hoffman, said he believed Mr. Hoffman had not stopped fighting and had not committed suicide.

"Abbie, as many of you know, was somewhat careless with pills, and we always warned him about this kind of thing," the brother said, according to The Associated Press.

The coroner, though, reported finding the residue of about 150 pills and alcohol in Mr. Hoffman's system.

He said in a telephone interview later in the day: "There is no way to take that amount of phenobarbital without intent. It was intentional and self-inflicted."

Mr. Hoffman's body was discovered last Wednesday night by his friend and landlord, Michael Waldron. Mr. Waldron had been called by Mr. Hoffman's longtime companion, Johanna Lawrenson of New York, who told him she was concerned that Mr. Hoffman had not answered his telephone all day.

Mr. Waldron said in an interview Monday that he had banged on the door of the cement-block turkey coop that he and Mr. Hoffman had converted to an apartment, and that Mr. Hoffman had not responded.

I knocked on a window and looked in and saw him in bed, covered by a blanket," Mr. Waldron said."

Mr. Waldron said he let himself in with his own key and felt the body. "He was already cold." Mr. Hoffman was fully clothed, except for shoes, he said.

“The apartment was guarded by police officers Monday, but was described by investigators as “neat as a pin, immaculate” and sparsely furnished.

“Mr. Waldron said Mr. Hoffman had moved there in June 1987, but had been active in opposing a water pumping project in connection with a nuclear plant for several years before that, and was well known in the area.”

Mr. Waldron said Mr. Hoffman had spent the past year and a half writing and giving speeches. He often practiced the speeches by shouting out the window to the pair of llamas,” Mr. Waldron recalled.

“He’d be chanting and screaming, and the llamas were spellbound,” he said. “They’d follow him anywhere.”

Mood Swings

After the body was found last Wednesday, the Bucks County District Attorney, Alan M. Rubenstein, said that “prescription drugs and other items were found on the premises,” but he did not elaborate. Mr. Hoffman’s family said he had been taking lithium carbonate to help deal with the mood swings of manic depression, which is characterized by periods of high exuberance and activity alternating with deep gloom and often suicidal depression.

Mr. Hoffman’s 28-year-old son, Andrew, an artist, and a daughter, Ilya, 26, a social worker, who both live in Boston, initially discounted the suicide possibility, but Andrew conceded last week that his father’s “depression went from hour to hour. Others who knew Mr. Hoffman said he had been depressed for several months after discovering that his mother, Florence, 83, was suffering from cancer, and that he himself was in pain from foot and hand injuries suffered in an automobile accident. Others said he was tired of the college lecture circuit. The lectures earned him about \$60,000 a year, although he gave much of it away.

Memorial Service Planned

A memorial service is planned for 1 P.M. Wednesday in Mr. Hoffman’s hometown of Worcester, Mass., at Temple Emanuel, which he attended as a child.

A peace march, which is to be led by the folk singer Pete Seeger, will precede the memorial, beginning at noon at the Hoffman family home in Worcester.

Jack Hoffman said some of his brother’s former compatriots in protest movements had been invited.

I want it to be a celebration; I want everybody to be singing and swaying,” he said. He said his brother was nearly broke when he died. “He gave just about everything away. He didn’t die with a Rolex. He died with a full heart.

An article on Wednesday about the death of Abbie Hoffman gave an incomplete description of his relationship with the “onetime comrade in arms” who said Mr. Hoffman had found life in the 80’s irrelevant. That person, anonymous in some editions and identified in others as Tom Hayden, was a defendant with Mr. Hoffman in the Chicago Seven conspiracy trial of 1969, but the two were not friends in later years.

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