

Father's Day grim for imprisoned crusader

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Many kids will spend Father's Day fixing him breakfast and some simply will mark the occasion with a greeting card, but George Sassower's three daughters planned to make picket signs, alert Amnesty International and badger members of Congress to get their father released from a prison hospital in Minnesota.

Sassower, 65, a half-blind, former lawyer from White Plains, N.Y., has been arrested, shackled, and shuttled to federal lockups in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Alabama, Florida and Oklahoma — all in the past two weeks.

His crime: contempt of court.

Sassower is on a crusade against what he sees as corruption among New York's top judges and high officials. "Filthy," as he puts it.

In countless times over eight years, he has tried to get the courts to respond to his charges, which he has made in more than 300 motions in various state and federal courts.

As a result of his unabated appetite for litigation, Sassower has been disbarred, fined, and jailed eight times.

Most recently, U.S. District Judge Nicholas Politan of New Jersey sent him to a federal prison hospital in Rochester, Minn., to undergo a month of psychological observation. Since May 18, he has been held without bail on a misdemeanor, charged with disobeying a court order to refrain from filing legal motions.

"This time I'm scared," said Sassower, in a June 9 telephone call to United Press International from the El Reno Federal Correctional Facility in El Reno, Okla. "If I die, there was foul play."

That may sound paranoid, but several prominent people and groups who have read about Sassower are concerned about his case.

Among them: Rep. Theodore Weiss, D-N.Y.; state Assemblyman G. Oliver Koppell of the Bronx, Harvard Law Professor Alan Dershowitz, Amnesty International, the American Civil Liberties Union, the New York State Defender's Association and the Jewish War Veterans.

"No matter what he's done, this sounds like overkill," said Weiss.

"This is a paradigm ACLU case," said Dershowitz. "I'm growing increasingly concerned about judges who lock up political dissidents in mental hospitals."

Since June 4, Sassower has been taken on an odyssey through the prison system. He was hauled out of Metropolitan Correctional Center in Manhattan and taken to Stewart Air Force Base in Newburgh, N.Y. Then, over the course of three days he was taken to federal prison facilities in Harrisburg, Pa.; Birmingham, Ala.; Tallahassee, Fla. and El Reno, Okla.

Since last week, he's been at a mental hospital run by the federal Bureau of Prisons in Rochester, Minn.

"On a misdemeanor? That's outrageous," said Koppell, who heads the state Assembly's Judiciary Committee. "I've seen rapists treated better."

"It often takes several stops for inmates to get to their final destination," said Gregory Bogdan, a federal prison spokesman in Washington, D.C.

Sassower's legal troubles stem from his assertion, made in at least 300 motions since 1980, that the assets of a men's clothing business he used to represent, Puccini Clothes Ltd. of Brooklyn, were "plundered" by the lawyers appointed to protect the company.

Sassower claims the lawyers racked up more than \$2.5 million in fees for two Manhattan law firms, Feltman, Karesh, Major & Farberman, and Kreindler & Relkin.

Puccini had been placed in court-ordered receivership when one of its four partners, Milton Kaufman, died and the executor of his will, Citibank, asked that the company be involuntarily dissolved.

The law firms say Sassower's a "kook" and a "legal terrorist," bent on litigating them to death. The courts have sided with the law firms.

But Sassower says Puccini's assets were never accounted for properly, an action he says covers up what he calls the "theft" of more than \$750,000. "They plundered all of what was left of Puccini," said Sassower. "They ate up the cookie jar."

The courts, after rejecting Sassower's claims, ordered him not to file any more motions in state or federal courts.

Sassower contends most of his problems stem from his allegations of corruption against state Supreme Court Justice Francis Murphy of Manhattan's Appellate Division. Murphy is under investigation by the state Commission on Judicial Conduct for alleged abuses of the court disciplinary system. Murphy calls the charges "scurrilous."

Sassower's personal court battle has been interrupted, but his three daughters — Elena, Carey and Beth — are determined to get their father out of jail. They've called state and federal lawmakers and asked several lawyers to take up the case.

Frustrated by their father's continued incarceration, the Sassower daughters were planning to picket in front of the federal court building on Foley Square in Manhattan, protesting their father's incarceration as a "political prisoner of conscience."

"In an age of cynicism, when scandal and corruption seem the way of the world, the people deserve to know about courageous individuals such as my father, who do not sell their integrity and who are willing to put life, livelihood and reputation on the line to preserve the Constitution and the rule of law," Elena Sassower said, adding: "I wish he were home with us for Father's Day."