

Trial highlights Canadian cult link

More than 70 Solar Temple members died in ritual murders and suicide blazes

Toronto Star

Oct. 25, 2006.

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MONTREAL—The chilling ritual known within the Order of the Solar Temple as "transit to Sirius" — a distant star where members of the doomsday cult believed they would live eternally once their souls were cleansed by flames — was first practised in the Laurentian hills north of Montreal.

It was a frigid October morning in 1994, and after fire crews tamed a raging blaze at a condo in the cottage-country town of Morin Heights, Que., they made a sickening discovery: five bodies, including that of a baby.

More than a decade later, a conductor who once taught at the University of Toronto and directed the Canadian Opera Company's orchestra is facing a second trial for his alleged role in a rash of deaths in Quebec, France and Switzerland.

Michel Tabachnik, a 62-year-old Franco-Swiss conductor and composer, is alleged to have intimate ties to the Order of the Solar Temple, a shadowy international cult that shot to prominence in the mid-1990s after dozens of its adherents died in several waves of mass suicide.

The classically educated conductor, who has worked with several leading European musicians, spent much of the 1980s and early 1990s in Canada, shuttling between his job as artistic director of the Orchestre Jeunesse du Quebec and guest-conducting with the Opera de Montreal, the Quebec Symphony Orchestra, the U of T, and the Canadian Opera Company.

Yesterday Tabachnik was led into a courtroom in Grenoble, France, to start a trial that's expected to last two weeks.

He has maintained his innocence since he was first detained in 1996 and was acquitted on charges of "criminal association" with the cult's leaders at his first trial in 2001. French prosecutors appealed the verdict and an appellate court ordered the second trial.

If convicted, he could face up to 10 years in prison.

A former cult member recalls that Tabachnik was often in the company of Luc Jouret, a charismatic Swiss homeopath and a leading member of the group, and was also a close friend of Joseph Di Mambio, the cult's self-proclaimed leader.

Tabachnik has admitted his friendship with the two men dates back to 1977, but denies ever being a member of the cult, let alone a high-ranking one.

"I saw (Tabachnik) often at conferences, Jouret and he would give private presentations to groups of 30, 60, 80 business people, Luc had decided to branch out beyond OST ... I didn't like the guy, you either have good chemistry with someone or you don't. He just froze me," said Hermann Delorme, who left the group in 1993 and chronicled his time in the Solar Temple orbit in a 1996 book.

Delorme doubts he was ever considered a full member of the cult — the admission criteria were left to the whim of the leadership, and he never paid the hefty dues charged to others.

But Delorme, who now lives a quiet life in Quebec's Eastern Townships, recalls his three years in the Order's midst as "fun, traumatic, horrendous; a tremendous experience of which I don't regret a single minute."

Those kinds of recollections are jarring for relatives of cult victims, who have formed an association in France and retained a Geneva lawyer to pursue Tabachnik and others.

Tabachnik is the only person to go before the courts in connection with the deaths, which have never been fully explained thanks to a series of botched police investigations.

The Morin Heights fire was set by Swiss-born cult members Jerry and Colette Genoud, who each took a handful of barbiturates before setting the timer on a gasoline bomb that would incinerate their condo.

Days before, they had participated in the ritual murder of two fellow cult members and their 3-month-old baby, said to be considered "the anti-Christ."

Within hours of the Morin Heights fire, similar blazes were set in a pair of Swiss towns. Rescue workers recovered 53 calcified bodies, many showing signs of a violent end. More than 70 cult members would die in similar circumstances over a three-year period.

On Dec. 23, 1995, investigators happened upon a gruesome scene in the French Alps, where 16 bodies — including four children — had been arrayed in a star formation in a remote clearing. All had been shot.

The last mass death, in 1997, involved five cult members who perished in a house fire in St. Casimir, a bucolic community that sits in the farmland between Montreal and Quebec City.

Police investigating that incident uncovered a list of more than 500 cult members, a document they allege included Tabachnik's name.

With files from Associated Press

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