

Expert on Dialects Deciphers Dilemma of Accused Airline Employee

His Acquittal Is a Matter of Sound Judgment

By ROBERT SCHWARTZ, *Times Staff Writer*

He was arrested, fired from his job, forced into thousands of dollars of debt and jailed for nine months because his thick East Coast accent was mistaken for the voice of a persistent bomb threat caller.

He was cleared of the charges only after an expert in English dialects, using tapes of the two voices saying "a bomb is going off," disarmed the prosecution and astonished the judge by proving that the voices could not have come from the same person.

The bomb threat caller was clearly from the Boston area, the linguistics professor said, while the defendant had a distinct New York accent.

Pressing His Claims

Paul Prinzivalli, a native of Long Island, is now fighting to reclaim his job at Pan American World Airways.

Prinzivalli, 39, was arrested Feb. 16, 1984, while on duty at Pan Am's cargo warehouse at Los Angeles International Airport, and charged by the Los Angeles County district attorney with making a series of false bomb threats to Pan Am flights. Company officials and police believed after listening to tapes of the bomb threats that the "East Coast voice" of the caller belonged to Prinzivalli.

In May, after having spent nine months and seven days

in county jail while awaiting trial, Prinzivalli was acquitted—largely, the judge and the prosecutor say, because of the extraordinary testimony of Prof. William Labov, a sociolinguist from the University of Pennsylvania.

Labov was able to discern fine differences between the two voices and demonstrate that the bomb threat calls were made by a man with a Boston accent, and could not have been made by Prinzivalli.

Now, Prinzivalli wants his job back, along with about \$30,000 in back pay.

But Pan Am says he is not entitled to lost wages, and it will only rehire him if he agrees not to sue the airline for damages.

Prinzivalli, a stocky cargo handler and self-described malcontent, says that is an offer he cannot accept.

"I don't think I could go back and live with myself if I let them off the hook like that," said Prinzivalli, the grandson of Sicilian immigrants. "What they're doing is like sticking a knife in me and then asking me if I want a Band-Aid. Maybe it should be enough, but it isn't."

Pan Am officials argue that the company was the victim, not the perpetrator, of a crime, and if a mistake was made in arresting Prinzivalli, then it was the district attorney's

fault—not theirs.

In his attorney's Westside offices, a nervous and sometimes teary Prinzivalli retold his bureaucratic nightmare, which has left him with a bitterness "that will always be there."

His ordeal began in October, 1983, when Pan Am received the first phone call saying there was a bomb on a flight to the South Pacific.

About 25 calls came in over the next five months, all apparently from the same man, and always forcing Pan Am to unload the same flight, one of its big moneymakers.

For that reason, says Deputy Dist. Atty. James Baker, who prosecuted the case, investigators suspected that it was an inside job.

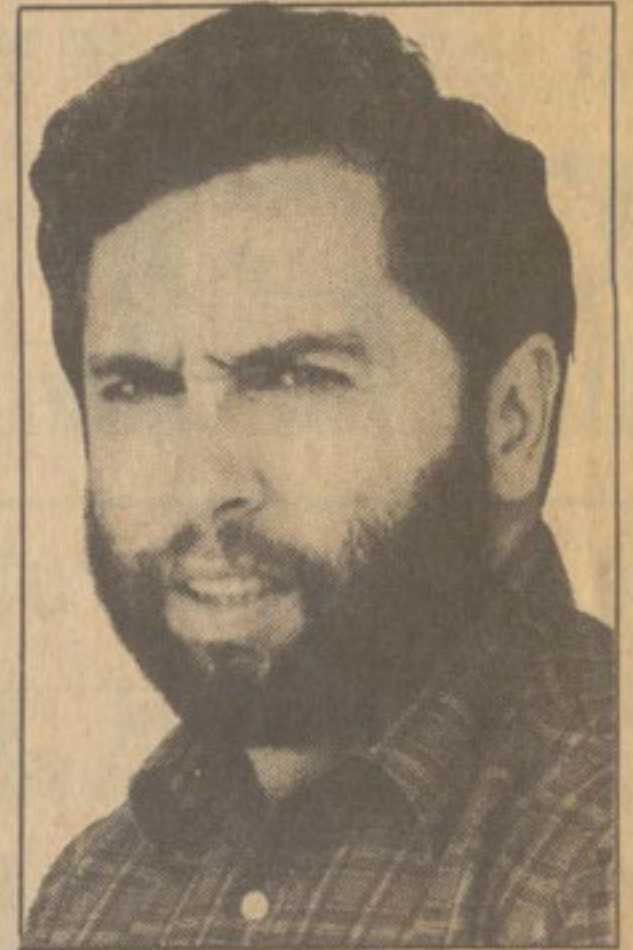
Tape Recording Used

When company officials and investigators heard an "East Coast, New York-type accent" on snippets of the threats recorded by reservations clerks, "someone in cargo said 'Hey, that's Prinzivalli,'" Baker said.

Prinzivalli lived in Elmont, Long Island, for 27 years.

A tape of Prinzivalli's voice was prepared by detectives, who then asked several Pan Am employees if they thought

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Paul Prinzivalli

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