

Tapes Implicate Father In Killing

By Judith Vandewater
and Tim Bryant

Of the Post-Dispatch Staff

In the final months of Palestina Isa's life, Zein Isa told several relatives and friends that his youngest daughter was beyond redemption and deserved to die for besmirching the family honor, according to a tape recording played in court Tuesday evening.

"You know for me this one has become a burned woman, a black whore, and there is no way to cleanse her except through the red color that cleanses her," Isa said of Palestina in one of five emotion-packed and metaphor-laced telephone conversations played to jurors.

Isa and his wife, Maria Isa, are on trial for first degree murder in the death of 16-year-old Palestina, known as Tina, on Nov. 6, 1989. Tina was stabbed to death at the family's apartment. Prosecutors are seeking the death penalty against the Isas. Zein Isa is claiming self-defense in the case.

Prosecutors have tape recordings of phone conversations in which Isa damns his daughter's conduct.

In one conversation a month before Tina's murder, Zein Isa told another daughter that in the event of Tina's death, he would claim self-defense. "I'll put a knife in her hand after she falls down, of course," he said.

Zein Isa was under FBI surveillance prior to his daughter's death, and a "bug" in the family's apartment captured the phone conversations and the deadly struggle.

Circuit Judge Charles A. Shaw instructed the jurors that the tapes could only be considered in the case of Zein Isa and not in the case of Maria Isa. In a few of the tapes, Zein Isa mentioned that his wife seemed to be taking Tina's side in the stormy domestic disputes over Tina's rebellion against strict family rules.

The conversations were in Arabic, with some English sprinkled throughout. Zein Isa, 60, is a Palestinian who became a naturalized citizen. His wife is Brazilian.

Peter Heath, an assistant professor of Arabic language and literature at Washington University, translated the conversations. He read from transcripts at the trial.

Testimony earlier in the day estab-

lished the Isas were angered because their daughter was dating a black man, Cliff Walker, 20.

In an Aug. 18, 1989, conversation Zein Isa told Abu Nafiz, a man Isa referred to affectionately as "my brother," that he had reached the end of his patience with Tina. "There is no way, there is no way to teach her manners. Teaching her has to take place in the hotel under ground," Isa told Nafiz.

One of Tina's sisters, Fatima Abdeljabbar, phoned her father Oct. 13, 1989, as he was preparing for bed to advise the family to be strict with Tina.

Zein Isa told Abdeljabbar, "If God makes my wish, I'll put her in the grave."

Prosecutors allege that Zein Isa stabbed Tina to death while Maria Isa held her daughter by her hair. Defense attorneys have indicated that Tina confronted her father with a knife she got from the kitchen and died in a struggle over the weapon.

The trial was expected to last all week. Jurors are being sequestered at a hotel.