

A Scientologist's Story

Harry Palmer's Scientology Mission, Star's Edge, and Avatar Special Report Series, Elmira Star-Gazette, February 2 - 7, 1988

By Lisa Bennett, Staff Writer

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The five segments are here condensed into one article without repeated introductions and summaries of previous articles. Most were prefaced with the following:}

The people in this story considered themselves members of the Church of Scientology under the local direction of Harry Palmer, during the period in which most of these events occurred. However, as the result of a lawsuit, Palmer is no longer connected with the Church of Scientology. His local organization is now called the Center for Creative Learning. The Lawsuit was settled in May, 1987.

Years of Devotion End Painfully

February 2, 1988

She left the man she loved when they told her he was a bad influence. She left her two-day-old baby at home when they told her they needed her back. She encouraged her friends to get into debt when they told her it would be good for them.

For 12 years, Margie Kuentz Hoffman was a model Scientologist -- teacher, recruiter and third in command at Harry Palmer's Center for Creative Learning in Elmira, formerly the Elmira Mission of the Church of Scientology.

Then, four months ago, she quit. And last month, she told her story. Through most of those years, Hoffman believed she was helping people, spreading a religion that professes to cure emotional pain by recalling and sorting through the unpleasant experiences of our past, much like psychoanalysis.



MARGIE HOFFMAN explains how her career as a model Scientologist ended in disillusionment.

In time, however, she discovered that Scientology could also cause pain -- she began to recognize it as a cult. But by then, it wasn't easy to walk away. She had devoted years of her life (and thousands of dollars) to it. And Scientology's powerful manipulations -- shaped by the charismatic Palmer -- made departure seem an act of betrayal.

When a disillusioned Hoffman finally left Palmer last October, she was one of the last to go. Most of the staff that had flocked to Palmer's side in the mid-1970s quit (and a few were fired) earlier in the year, shocked and hurt by the puzzle they pieced together about their spiritual leader.

Now 33 and married to the man she temporarily gave up for Scientology, Hoffman spends her days at her Southside home with her 2-year-old daughter, Cody, and her black cat, Gus. The Scientology books have been stored away in the attic.

Hoffman's story is not just about faith born and shattered, however. She doesn't regard herself as a victim -- "I did it, I went along with it" -- and she doesn't behave like one. In fact, at times she laughs about some of the things she fell for. In serious moments, her outlook is balanced. "They were the best and worst years of my life."

Hoffman believes what happened to her could have happened to anyone. "It's easy for a stranger on the street to say what a jerk!" she said. "But this happened to us over months and years. If it all happened in one day, we'd know we were schtuped."

For Hoffman, it began in May 1975. She was studying hairdressing in Syracuse when her 22-year-old boyfriend, Wink, died in a car accident. She was devastated. "It haunted me," she remembered. "Why did he die so young? I wanted to be happy. How come I couldn't make myself?"

Then, months after returning home to Elmira to work as a hairdresser, a customer one day told her about Scientology and Palmer's center, just down the street from her.

"He gave me a personality questionnaire -- one of those famous personality questionnaires," Hoffman said, referring to the hundreds of forms that were tucked under windshield wipers, between front doors and into the hands of people waiting in the laundromat next to the center.

She filled out the form and brought it in. Palmer offered her this diagnosis: "He said I was at a low point. I had a goal. I had a strong personality. My communication level was down. I liked people, but I felt they didn't like me. I felt I was different from most people." It was as general as the analysis a card-reader gives for \$5 at a street fair, but it clicked for Hoffman.

She spent an afternoon at the library investigating the claims she had heard about the religion, including some of its strange rules like barring members from taking aspirin.

"I got out every bad article about Scientology," she said. "I read in Reader's Digest about L. Ron Hubbard (Scientology's founder) putting his cigarette out on people; and in Time magazine about how they lured you in to get all your money and all the weird rituals."

The money didn't bother her. "I didn't care about the money. I was single. I made a lot of money." And she was skeptical about the more outrageous allegations. "I never saw those things happening. I decided I would continue until I saw something."

So she dug out \$45 and signed up for the first Scientology course, a four-week lesson in communication.

Scientology classes are based on an E-meter, or simplified lie detector. While attached to it, Hoffman answered many personal, searching questions to get to "engrams": the things one would rather not recognize about oneself, the kernels of self-truth that hurt. Some 100 questions range from "have you ever passed up an opportunity?" to "Have you ever broken up a family?"

When a counselor saw the meter fluctuate, she pushed Hoffman to dig deeper for the original source of the problem, believed to exist often in the subconscious or in a prior life. Reaching the source is called a "win".

In the beginning, the win experience is as uplifting as a successful session of psychoanalysis; it freed Hoffman from a burden, making her feel that some important problems in life had been solved. Some people discovered why they only married unstable mates, why they couldn't make good friends, or like Hoffman, why she cried when it rained.

"It sounds crazy or unimportant, but it makes sense," she said. "In my subconscious, it clicked." She was excited, too, with the religion's philosophy, expressed in the 1950s by Hubbard as a mission to clear the planet of misery.

"I guess my ego got the best of me," she said, "... Before Scientology, I thought this was a one-horse town. Then I thought, 'How incredible! It's happening here.'"

When Hoffman was offered a second course, called Life Repair, the price soared to \$1,750. "I said, 'You're kidding. Come on, Really, how much is it?'" But Scientologists do not joke about money.

So Hoffman paid. Within two years, she had spent \$20,000 and was making loan payments like "a good little Scientologist." By Scientology standards, that's moderate. One former student, Kathy Raine, spent \$60,000.

But that's the way Scientology works, Hoffman said: "First, you put your toe in and it feels OK, nice and warm. Pretty soon you're swimming."

And persuading others to jump in. Hoffman, like all Scientologists, was taught to recruit every Wog (non-Scientologist) she met.

Thomas Wright, a former Palmer staff member, said the approach to non-members as: "I'd ask you if anything was bothering you." But it wasn't asked idly, like "How are you?" Wright would probe, make himself a friend, asking for you secrets, however deep or dark. Then he would explain that it could all be cured by signing up for classes.

After Hoffman took every class available, and was elated by the program, she was sold on recruiting full time. "They pushed the help button in me," she said. They asked: "Don't you want others to feel that way, too?"

But it wasn't just charity that motivated. "There was always the threat of being a Cinder" she explained. A Cinder was a damned person, a fate much worse than a Wog. If Hoffman did not spread the religion, she was taught, she could lose what she had gained with grit and \$20,000.

It was then -- the moment she became an insider -- that the unadulterated good feelings she had about Scientology began to dissolve. What disturbed her most and what she still finds most difficult to talk about, was the "heavy, heavy discipline."

Discipline wasn't new to Hoffman -- Scientology is based on discipline and that, in part, attracted her -- but it became particularly rough from 1981 to 1983. She made efforts to rebel, twice leaving the group. Then, at the urging of other leaders, she came back both times. Now, she says: "I missed my chance twice."

The main disciplinary practices took place in the "ethics room" and through "amends projects." Former student Raine recalled that in the ethics room she had to "write and write and write" about all the bad things she ever did and hope the list would satisfy the center's leaders.

She hated it. So did Hoffman.

Complaints, doubts and missed classes could land a member in the ethics room. Or, explained Hoffman, "If your graph was not constantly going up, you were in ethics."

The graph in question was a weekly measure of how much work each staff member was doing. It encouraged Thomas Wright, who supervised students, to push them through classwork faster and faster.

"I got to the point," said Wright, "that I was not worried about how they were doing," just that they were doing it quickly.

In the drive to keep her graph moving up, Hoffman pushed to sell more and more courses. "if it (the graph) went down a little one week," Hoffman said, she was sent to the ethics room. There, she would have to evaluate what she did wrong and figure how to correct it.

"If it continued to go down, that meant you were dishonest." For that, the ethics room was not discipline enough. For that, she would be assigned an amends project -- an opportunity to atone for her failings.

Essentially, amends amounted to more work or money. Steven Caulkin, a former door-to door Scientology promoter, was once given the opportunity to make amends, too. His project: Clean the basement that was still filled with dried muck from the 1972 flood. It took him two weeks.

After Gale Lyons committed the Scientologist's sin of complaining, she was told to clean around the basement pipes with a paintbrush. When her daughter -- already \$60,000 in debt -- could not afford \$100 for a Christmas present for Palmer, she was told: Pay \$300.

Hoffman saw these assignments as cruel. But when assigned ethics or amends projects, she did them. She believed her spiritual well-being was at stake.

In more direct terms, Hoffman did not want to be refused the chance to take part in the center. And, she was intrigued by the discipline. "I wanted to get to the limit of my subconscious," She recalled, "to see how much I could put up with."

Belief Takes Away Friends, Family - Even Lover

February 3, 1988

After she became a Scientologist, Margie Kuentz Hoffman understood her parents better than ever before. But she no longer wanted to spend time with them.

"That's the weird point," Hoffman said. "I was getting insight but (was) alienated... I didn't want to hang out with them. That kind of life was not important.

That kind of life didn't include Scientology. And Scientology was considered more important than anything. "My friends and family were appalled" said Hoffman. But, then, friends and family were not too much to sacrifice for Scientology.

According to Scientology's hierarchy, the individual and the family are the least important things in life. More important is the group. "But, at the center, the group was really considered most important", said Steven Caulkin, a former employee.



Margie Kuentz Hoffman



THE CENTER FOR CREATIVE LEARNING is located in a yellow building on the corner of Water and Columbia streets, Elmira.
Staff photo by Jeff Richards

At the center, Hoffman and the others followed a man and a religion that professed to have a monopoly on the truth. "If you believed in anything else -- in Yoga or Christianity -- I wouldn't have accepted that there was any truth in that."

She was not even supposed to listen to someone discuss his belief, nor read a book by anyone but L. Ron Hubbard, the founder of Scientology.

When it came to Wogs (non-Scientologists), there were only two things she could do: Convert them or pity them. She did try to sell

her friends on Scientology. As a result, "I lost a lot of friends," Hoffman said.

But then she fell in love with a Wog.

Immediately, Palmer started a campaign against Hoffman's new boyfriend.

The pressure was so intense that she didn't bring Dan around much, even though Palmer and his partner, Avra Honey Smith, were her best friends. It felt too uncomfortable, too unacceptable.

"In the real world, people don't usually criticize your mate. But there, it was very popular," said Marianne Helsing, a former staff member. "It certainly undermined marriages".

Gale Lyons was one who divorced her husband over Scientology. Their difficulties began after only her third class. "He wouldn't give me the money for it. So I took it out of the bank," she said. "We didn't talk for three months".

After Lyons became a staff member, she made the more difficult move. "You have to believe in what you're doing to divorce your husband", she said.

"It's been years, and it hurts so bad".

The pressure almost kept Hoffman from marrying. She left Dan Hoffman once.

But then she returned, married him in 1984 and followed a new strategy: "I lived a double life". Scientologist by day, wife by night. "I was somebody else when I came home", she said. "I couldn't help being sad, but I wouldn't tell him.

Even marriages between Scientologists involved pressure, Kathy Raine, a former student, was married to Thomas Wright, a former staff member. But they were not supposed to - and rarely did - talk about things that concerned them, such as her \$ 60,000 in outstanding loans.

Nor did they have much time together. Wright, like most employees, worked 12 hours a day. Raine spent about 20 hours a week at the center, worked two jobs and distributed Scientology advertisements in her spare hours.

Meanwhile, she wanted children. But she was told she would not make a good mother. "They convinced me I was screwed up somehow.... I had to clear myself of engrams (negative mental pictures) first," she said. Raine spent four years working on it. Now she is 30 and still without children.

"I think the reason children were discouraged," said Raine, "was because they took money away from the center". Children would also have taken away time.

Hoffman became pregnant once and then miscarried, she thinks, because she spent too many hours working - mornings as a hairdresser and afternoons, evenings and weekends at the center - with only three days off a year. "After that, I decided to get my ideals straight. I quit hairdressing," she said, pausing. "So, it was the wrong ideal. I should have picked door number two."

It was about then, however, that Palmer decided Hoffman was not hardhearted enough to succeed at the spiritual ideal. Under pressure from a lawsuit the worldwide Church of Scientology filed against him, Palmer pushed his staff to bring in more money. Hoffman's mistake was that she sympathized with people who said they were already in too much debt.

"I was booted out because I was not mean enough" Hoffman said. She was replaced by someone who was.

HOFFMAN SAYS SHE WAS THREATENED

Margie Kuentz Hoffman, the focus of this week's Star-Gazette series, "A Scientologist's Story", complained to police Tuesday that she had received a threatening note.

Checking into her report, Elmira City police questioned Harry Palmer, director of the Center for Creative Learning at police headquarters. They also questioned his partner, Avra Honey Smith, at the center.

Hoffman received a note Monday which threatened to expose private, embarrassing statements about her if she failed to "clean up" things she said about her experience at the center.

It read (with typographical errors): "Maybe its time the wold knowxz the kin d of person you azre. Clean up the 3rd party on H or they will". In Scientology, "Third party" refers to negative talk. Palmer commonly signed his correspondence with "H" according to several former employees.

Efforts Tuesday to reach Palmer at his home and the center were unsuccessful.

Enclosed with the note were five pages from a five-inch file that Palmer has on Hoffman, according to Marianne Helsing, a former employee responsible for the files.

It contains written confessions Hoffman made during discipline sessions over 12 years in the center's "Ethics room". Hoffman documented, once over two straight months, everything she did and thought that she felt was bad or "not spiritual".

Palmer refused to return the file when Hoffman quit last October, she said. The envelope was addressed to Hoffman at the center, then forwarded by the center to her home address. Police are continuing the investigations.

**Hoffman says
she was
threatened**



Palmer

- BENNET

Believers Learned Expensive Lesson

February 4, 1988

Kathy Raine used to hide her head in a book when Marianne Helsing came into the study room. "I'd think: 'Take my friend! Take my friend! Not me'". But, from time to time Helsing pointed her finger at Raine. And Raine obediently followed. It was her turn to be regged.

During "regging", or the registration cycle, Scientology students were sold on taking the next class. The fact that some were already signed up for classes -years in advance- was not a consideration.

Before 1983, the cost of being a Scientologist at Harry Palmer's Center for Creative Learning in Elmira was steep. After that, it went even higher.

It was, his former staff members say, Palmer's reaction to a lawsuit launched against him by the worldwide Church of Scientology. The Church alleged Palmer infringed upon the Church's trademarks, "Scientology" and "Dianetics".



Staff photo by Jeff Richard
HARRY PALMER, director of the Center for Creative Learning in Elmira, relaxes Wednesday in the center's reception room.

Palmer's center was then called The Elmira Mission of the Church of Scientology, an offshoot of the church and religion started by L. Ron Hubbard in the 1950s.

"During the legal battle Harry (Palmer) was asking people to buy in advance to help with the legal costs until our ship came in", said Margie Kuentz Hoffman.

One course, Life Repair, cost \$1,750.

Such courses professed to cure emotional pain by recalling and sorting through unpleasant past experiences.

Cash was preferred. "He told me that way, the church wouldn't get it", said Helsing. Students were told the center would close if they did not buy now. "These people, they had loans, and they said: 'OK, we'll take out another one'" said Linda Rosin a former staff member.

Raine put down \$25,000 for classes purchased in advance, bringing her total "contributions" to the center to \$80,000. She was among at least 10 to 20 students who each paid \$40,000 to take all the courses offered, according to Helsing.

The sales technique was a familiar one. "They'd say it's cheap. It's on sale until 2 p.m. Thursday", Raine said. When she was sold on a \$1,800 class she was told, "This is very inexpensive because it's usually \$5,000. You're getting the introductory price."

Later sales included courses for \$6,000, \$10,000, \$3,000, \$18,000 and \$20,000.

But the beckoning finger that invited Raine to the sales pitch, commonly on a Friday afternoon, was only the beginning of the regging cycle. After that came the battle plan: How to get a loan before 2 p.m. Thursday - when Scientologists nationwide add up tallies of their weekly income.

In three years, Raine acquired a one-foot high stack of loan rejection slips. She also secured \$50,000 towards her class bills from 15 lending institutions.

Raine said she was informally pressured to do whatever was necessary to get the loans. "I quickly learned not to say it (the loan) was for the center." Bank officers didn't consider it a wise investment. So Raine told them the money would pay for a honeymoon or appliances.

She also knew not to mention the incidental issue about other outstanding loans. "They told me to make it look real good," she said of Palmer's staff members". "All I needed was a hint."

Hoffman said staff leaders, including herself, sometimes insinuated there were ways to make bank applications look appealing. Helsing said she was not in the position to give hints, but that she did put great pressure on students to raise money.

Finding enough people to co-sign 15 loans demanded some creativity. Raine once used "Co-signs Caulkins". Steve Caulkins, a staff member who sold Scientology door-to-door, said he picked up the nickname after co-signing 10 loans for students at the center. The time it took to secure the loans interfered with the two jobs Raine held down to pay them off.

"They (staff members) called me at work all the time," she said. They pestered her to pester the banks. "Then, I had to sneak off to a phone because I didn't want people to know I was taking out a \$10,000 loan.

Heavy debts were not supposed to dissuade Helsing from making them heavier. "I was supposed to keep everyone encouraged, keep everyone willing to put down a flat few thousand," she said.

But last year, she encountered a special case: a couple that was bankrupt and having marriage difficulties because they spent almost all of their time apart, working off their debt, studying at the center and raising a child.

Officially, Helsing had two options on how she could have advised them to deal with their problems. She could have said: buy more counseling or spent more time taking classes. "It was more time or more money and they didn't have either one," Helsing said.

So she told them to go home. "That was the first time I didn't handle a situation in the preordained way," said Helsing. "It was the first time I advised someone to handle their life and not their psyche."

This was the turning point for Helsing - the first employee to leave the center. "There were a lot of people giving money," Helsing said.

"I didn't want to ask for more".

As a result Palmer fired her. He also made her the fail guy, former members said. Palmer told them that all of the pressure for money was her idea. He said he had told her to stop, but she wouldn't. So

he had to fire her. (Palmer acknowledged in an interview that he fired Helsing for that reason). In the Scientologist's lexicon, Palmer declared Helsing a "suppressive personality" -an irrevocably evil person, one of the few that make up 2,5 to 3 percent of society. The other members were told not to talk to her, or they, too, could become such a person. "I cried for six months," Helsing said.

About the time Helsing stopped crying, the suit against Palmer had been settled, in March 1987, with the agreement that he would not use the words "Scientology" or "Dianetics". In its place, he offered a new course, called Avatar, which sold for \$2000.

For Raine, this led to a natural question: "I began to wonder what happened to all the money I put in for Scientology courses." But when she asked what happened to the \$25,000 she had outstanding, she was told there was no money left. It had been used up in legal and other expenses.

That was when Palmer's employees started talking - really talking - for the first time.

As The Empire Crumbles, Some Save Themselves

February 5, 1988

She was on the West Coast promoting Harry Palmer's newest course, Avatar, when the phone calls from Elmira started coming in. Palmer's hometown followers were upset, in great debt and preparing to sue him.

When Margie Kuentz Hoffman told Palmer about the calls and urged him to do something, she says he offered her a proposition. "He said: I'll give your bleeding heart friends their money back if you pay me \$5,000."

"I told him he was crazy", Hoffman said.

It was October 1987-a decade since her struggle between faith in what Palmer preached and distress over how he treated people began. Day after day, year after year, faith had prevailed.

But when the money question arose early last year, it shook Hoffman into disillusionment. Suddenly it seemed to her that Palmer was more interested in money than in helping people.

Since 1983, Palmer had pressured staff members to urge students to pay for classes in advance: it was supposed to help pay for legal expenses in the suit filed against Palmer by the worldwide Church of Scientology. Believers in the cause, students and staff members complied.

But then the suit was settled in the spring of 1987, with Palmer agreeing not to use the words "Scientology" or "Dianetics". In its place, he introduced a new course called Avatar, which sold for \$2,000 and \$3,000. In less than a year after he went on the road to promote it, Avatar spread to 119 locations in nine countries, according to Palmer. He earns 15 percent in royalties.

Back home in Elmira, meanwhile, there were students like Kathy Raine, who paid \$25,000 in advance for the courses that were no longer being offered.

When she asked about the money she was told there wasn't any money left. It had all been used up in legal and other expenses. When members asked about the money Palmer was getting from Avatar they say they were told that was earned through Palmer's for-profit business, called Star's Edge Research and Development. The center is considered a church.

To students and staff members who pledged money during the years of the suit, all of this boiled down to one impression: "He kept telling us to wait until our ship comes in", said Hoffman. "And", added Marianne Helsing, "when the ship came in he threw everybody else off."

Raine, and others like her, were offered two options. She could use up her money on account by taking Avatar or receiving more counseling, which cost \$160 per hour. "He wanted everyone to do counseling because that way he wouldn't have to give them the money back", said Gale Lyons, who conducted the counseling sessions.

A moderate amount of counseling, like a moderate amount of psychoanalysis, is a good thing; but overuse is dangerous, former members said. "A lot of auditing (counseling) is finding the things in

life you didn't feel good about," said Lyons. "Think about them enough and you start thinking you're really bad."

And they did. But that was not new. Former members say they lost confidence in their own decision-making at the center. Reason: Palmer's "belief" system.

"The belief was that behind all upsets was a negative belief on your part," said Steve Caulkins, a former staff member. In other words, he said: "If I had an argument with you, it wasn't because of something you said or did. It was because of something negative that I did."

Even when Raine asked about her outstanding \$25,000, she was told to think about what she had done wrong that caused her to complain. "It seems stupid", she said in retrospect, "like a guy beats his wife and she thinks: What's wrong with me?"

Hoffman called it "a violation of human nature". Still, she was one of the most persistent believers. Many members left the center over the summer, and Hoffman kept working on into the fall.

By October, Hoffman was still promoting Avatar on the West Coast, while urging Palmer to pay back the money. She even came around again to this point of view - for a while.

"He told me I caused the upset in Elmira", Hoffman said. And, there was a bit of truth to that. Hoffman had been a model believer who inspired others. But two months earlier -for the first time- she told her husband she might leave. Word of her disillusionment spread and reaffirmed others who were in doubt. "Harry's empire had fallen". Hoffman said, "I thought, My God, look what I did to this great spiritual leader."

But she was too angry, and disappointed, to support him any longer.

The next day, Hoffman telephoned her friend and co-worker, Linda Rosin, in Elmira. "It's all over" she said. "I'm coming home." In two weeks, she would quit.

Shortly after, Palmer called " a meeting for the disgruntled". He announced there was no money left to pay them back. Helsing later asked if she could see the financial records. "He said they were all destroyed".

But Palmer offered to pay back half the money to some of the members. He said they should share in the loss of legal expenses paid during the court battle. Some took him up on it. "They took what they could and got out," said Helsing. Others are still planning lawsuits.

Hoffman does not have any financial claims against Palmer. But she has reclaimed part of herself. She has grown a little less trusting of others, though she has not become a cynic. "I'll always be open, ready for some adventure. I'll just be a little more skeptical first".

Palmer A Man Of Many Faces

February 7, 1988

It's not Harry Palmer's style to pause in mid-sentence. He speaks in a calm and steady voice, emotionless requiring not so much as a moment to collect his thoughts. And on this day he hasn't stopped long enough in the last two hours to finish off the peanut butter and apple sandwich in front of him. But suddenly, for the first time in two hours, he seems to have run out of words. Swallowing hard, he gazes out the window momentarily, then looks back to stare his visitor in the eye. When he speaks again, it is in a cracked voice, a near-whisper. "He was a good companion", Palmer says.

Palmer explains that it hurts to talk about his German shepherd, Greywolf, who disappeared last October. He points proudly to a picture above the main fireplace at his Centre for Creative Learning; it's Greywolf inside a cockpit of a helicopter, with his master standing by his side.



Is this Harry Palmer? The Harry Palmer under fire from Scientologists who followed him a decade? The Harry Palmer who they say deprived them of thousands of Dollars? The Harry Palmer who "could charm the pants off a rattlesnake"? The Harry Palmer who, his critics say, zeros in on weaknesses and exploits them?

It can't be. This Harry Palmer is soft-spoken, reserved and polite. He's easy-going, slumping in his chair; sometimes, he rests his workboot-clad foot on across a knee; and he laughs at his own jokes. He doesn't express anger or anxiety. And he is not a fast-talking, dynamic leader.

But there is another side to Palmer, a tougher side. Here's a man who, in the course of a 3 1/2 hour interview, showed no remorse for the many people who say they were hurt by him. Yet he became emotional over a German shepherd. And mild-mannered or not, he's a fighter, portraying himself not as the cause of his critics' problems but as a victim of their discontent.

The Greywolf episode illustrates both Palmers. In the same breath that he mourns his dog, Palmer accuses his followers of kidnapping it last October. And he uses the alleged kidnapping as the reason he stopped making refunds to those who claim he owes them refunds for Scientology classes they never received. Moreover, Palmer adds, their complaints about money add up to nothing but an extortion campaign.

But even these two glimpses of Palmer don't explain the man. He is an elusive character; he confuses, he contradicts, he twists, and turns. Still, in the course of the last week's interview and a one-hour telephone conversation early last month, some things about him seem clear.

For one thing, he has complete confidence in his power to influence. Even as his former management team was going public with their criticisms Palmer was saying they'd be back. "The reason these people are attacking me is because I have refused to make decisions for them. They were weaned. They were dependent on me and the centre. You're hearing the yelping of weaned pups. Now they think I'm awful. In six months, they think I'm wonderful."

That confidence has global dimensions. As Palmer tells it some 25,000 people inquired about or took his programs in Elmira since he began teaching Scientology in 1974 (after leaving a career as student center director in the Elmira school system). Now he's extending around the world with his new program, Avatar -he abandoned Scientology early last year- and says he already has licensed 119 centers in nine countries.

"I am at the point in the hurricane," he says. " I have a communication system at home that links me with the world, faster than the news does ... And I thought: they're bothering me in Elmira!" What excites him now are his plans to stretch his global impact even wider. Palmer is working on a new program, called Wizard, which will cost \$20,000 when it is ready. It uses logarithms to predict places and times in the world in which significant changes can occur, and he can influence them. He says he cannot disclose too much yet publicity because it would interfere with one such project in Latin America.

Palmer thinks big, no question. And he claims to have netted big money.

"Harry Palmer is a rich man" he says. "But those people (his former students) had nothing to do with it... I didn't make money from Scientology. I always had second jobs while I was working for the church".

Stars Edge Research and Development - the Palmer-owned company through which he sells Avatar-is "certainly a very rich company". But if Palmer is rich, he isn't ostentatious about his money. His center is bright, cheerful but not opulent -- books, a wall tapestry, a number of paintings of angels. And he himself dresses casually. On this day he is attired in a khaki shirt and pants, black-tinted sunglasses and a brown leather jacket. He introduces Susan Sweetland and Miken Chapell, his two remaining employees, and Avra Honey Smith, his wife and partner; all dressed in black. All, like Palmer, make gracious hosts. In the reception room, his eye catches a man sitting in the corner. "Ah, I haven't seen this guy in a while. How have you been?" It is Palmer's father. They speak a moment, then the father tells his son: "Take care of what you have to. I'll wait for you a few minutes". (Two hours later, the father is still there; but, oddly, they talk just for a few minutes, and the father departs.) Upstairs, he points out the offices of his former employees. In the hallway, there is an arrangement of pictures that include Palmer posing with smiling customers.

The pictures underscore another point about Palmer: He's a salesman -and like most salesmen, he points out that his customers are happy. Ninety percent are happy, he said early last month. During last week's tour the number had crept up to 95 percent. The following day, he used the figure 99 percent. In fact, Palmer denies every single criticism leveled by his former staff members. He says he never saw what others say they saw -heavy discipline, pressure for money, diminished self-confidence among his followers. And if those things did go on, Palmer said he certainly wasn't responsible. He was just another worker at the center, he says.

"There was a board of directors here. I was usually out-voted. I really did my own thing." And his own thing had nothing to do with money or discipline. He says his leading critics, including Hoffman, should start looking to themselves if they want someone to blame. He says his message to the flock always was: "You're your own guru." As for the confusion and diminished self-esteem and disillusionment they felt, he said, "I think they all did it to themselves..."

"It's a lot easier for these people to find something wrong with me than to inspect their own inadequacies of performance, their own inadequacies of ethics."

But Palmer does have a habit of blaming others; for example, after this series began, he fingered Hoffman as the person responsible for inciting his other followers. "Margie's fantasy for a long time has been to write a book about me and tell the whole truth... whatever that whole truth is. I think it just makes a heck of a better story to really have gone through it and have it be terrible, horrible, rough".

And he blames the Church of Scientology in part for the crumbling of his empire. All of which is consistent with the fact that Harry Palmer sees himself as a victim. "This is an extortion campaign, pure and simple" Palmer says of those who say he owes them money. "They saw the success of Avatar and they're trying to cash in".

He says he even tried to be charitable, claiming that his followers asked for 50 percent of their losses, and he paid the money in some cases - but not because he really owed it.

"I had no responsibility to give any money back. It was a gesture of kindness" Palmer said. "They never thought they'd get it back. They were very grateful to me". But Hoffman and others say that's nonsense; Palmer's people demanded 100 percent and Palmer would go no higher than half.

As it turned out, Palmer says he handed over \$ 70,000 in refunds within two weeks. But then one of his two German Shepherds was killed and the other - Greywolf - disappeared. And later at a meeting with members to discuss their money claims, when he began by asking for "their blessings for the safe return of Greywolf, one of the members told him he would get the dog back when he gave the money back.

"That's when I decided the whole thing was absurd" Palmer said, "... they were like sharks feeding". So he stopped paying.

Of course, that's not Palmer's only explanation for putting away his wallet. On another occasion, he said he stopped paying because he ran out of money. And now he sees himself as the victim of bad publicity. At one point during last week's interview, he was interrupted by the office intercom. He picked up the phone, listened a moment and then said, "Miken (Chappell) received a threat call for me?" Twisting his high-backed, orange chair around to look out onto Water Street, he listened a moment longer and then hung up. "That was because of the articles." He punched his palm with his fist. "That was my first threat call."

Palmer can play tough, too, however. Although as leader of his organization he said he believed "anything that is said to me is confidential", once Hoffman went public with her criticism, Palmer wasted no time tossing out confidential details about Hoffman's personal life - information he had gleaned from her files. Hoffman's ethics files, in fact, became a police issue last week when copies of them were sent to her along with a threatening note effectively ordering her to keep her mouth shut. After Hoffman complained to Elmira police, Palmer denied all responsibility. He says he didn't know there was anything embarrassing in the files; besides, added Palmer, anyone could have access to any members' files. So where does this story end? Margie Hoffman, after 12 years at the center, no longer believes in Harry Palmer. She believes in herself.

And Harry Palmer is still at it.