STAT

Sanitized Copy Approved for Release 2010/08/23 : CIA-RDP90-00552R000505100046-2

ON PAGE A-6

NEW YORK TIMES
6 August 1985

Papal Plot Trial: Agca's Credibility Is the Key Issue

By JOHN TAGLIABUE
Special to The New York Times

ROME, Aug. 5 — In the last eight weeks an Italian court has been hearing testimony on charges that eight men conspired in 1981 to assassinate Pope John Paul II. Yet the major question that has emerged is whether the prosecution's case is based on the testimony of a crackpot.

News Analysis

The prosecution's main witness, Mehmet Ali Agca, has charged that the Bulgarian secret service, at the behest of the Soviet Union, conspired to kill the Pope.

Mr. Acga, who shot the Pope, has continually reversed himself, added and subtracted evidence and admitted to lies and distortions. Mr. Agca, a gaunt, intense Moslem from central Turkey, has also claimed to be Jesus, predicted the imminent end of the world and said he was a political ideologue with close ties to the Vatican who deplored the use of violence for political ends.

Asks That Agca Be Tested

Domenico Martelli, a loquacious lawyer, has the job of defending Bekir Celenk, who is accused of being Mr. Agca's link with the Soviet bloc intelligence services. Recently, Mr. Martelli became the first defense lawyer to ask that Mr. Agca be made to undergo psychiatric testing.

Cataloging the more bizarre of Mr. Agca's pronouncements, Mr. Martelli called them "affirmations, in an extreme synthesis, of a delirious and megalomanic mind that lives in unreal situations."

The implication was that Mr. Agca, whatever the truth of his accusations, should be declared incapable of giving valid testimony.

After 31 sessions, testimony in the first phase of the trial ended on July 18, when the court adjourned for a summer recess that lasts until mid-September. The trial reconvened today for a special four-day session to take evidence from two Turkish witnesses.

Though some, like Mr. Martelli, doubt Mr. Agca's sanity, there are others who say he is merely a spinner of tales and whodunits, woven into a dense fabric from bits and pieces of information that he has gleaned for consumption of newspapers and television, in which he invariably plays the central role.

Mr. Celenk, in prison in Turkey since his arrival in Istanbul from Bulgaria on July 7, says he knows how Mr. Agca was able to insert him into the plot. Mr. Celenk says Mr. Agca read newspaper accounts of Mr. Celenk's reported involvement in Bulgarian-inspired arms and drug trafficking, written by a Turkish investigative reporter, Ugur Mumcu.

Part of Mr. Agca's erratic behavior, some court officials say, may be intended to shield Turkish accomplices. Despite Mr. Agca's statement that three other Turks were with him in St. Peter's Square — probably the most significant departure from pretrial testimony, in which he admitted to only one Turkish accomplice the day of the shooting — investigators have found scant evidence of their presence in Rome.

An American photographed a man fleeing from the square with a gun in his hand, but the snapshot is from behind, and the man has never been convincingly identified. An automatic camera in a Rome bank filmed Mr. Agca and another man shortly before the Pope was shot. Mr. Agca has said the man was Oral Celik, who is accused of acting as a backup gunman, but there is no independent proof.

'Never Offered a Single Clue'

In contrast with this dearth of evidence, Mr. Agca gave investigators a flood of details about the Bulgarian defendants, including descriptions of their apartments, hobbies and even their dentures.

Judge Severino Santiapichi, a white-haired Sicilian of immense patience, said recently with visible annoyance, "When we dealt with your alleged Turkish accomplices, who never left a trace in Rome, no matter where they stayed, you never offered a single clue."

Others, including the public prosecutor, Antonio Marini, say they suspect Mr. Agca's eccentric behavior might be deliberately designed to destroy his own credibility. Indeed, Mr. Agca himself lent credence to that view when he reacted to Mr. Martelli's description of his pronouncements to the court by grinning broadly and even laughing.

Moreover, such suspicions seemed to be reflected in a recent remark by Mr. Santiapichi, who said he found it curious that Mr. Agca reacted calmly to the proposed psychiatric test.

Contrasting that reaction with the violent outburst at a similar proposal during a trial in 1981, when Mr. Agca was convicted of shooting and wounding the Pope, Mr. Santiapichi told the Turk, "You would have jumped through the ceiling, at your lawyer and everyone else, saying: 'Crazy? My God! No, because if they declare me crazy, I'll remain in jail, or in an asylum, and then, goodnight, they'll close my account.'"

Mr. Agca replied laconically to the judge: "I had no reaction because the Turkish Government subjected me to psychiatric tests. Certainly, Italian justice can do the same. It's not difficult."

Information as Bargaining Chip

Still, court officials say Mr. Agca has often said he is using his information like a bargaining chip. To buy his freedom either from the Italian or the American Governments, who he evidently feels will one day reward him for involving the Soviet bloc, or from his former accomplices, who he says promised to free him if jailed, if need be by kidnapping an important person and demanding Mr. Agca's release.

He has frequently cited the kidnapping of Emanuela Orlandi, an Italian schoolgirl abducted by unidentified criminals who have frequently called for Mr. Agca's release in exchange for the girl's return.

But if Mr. Agca is using his information as a bargaining chip, of what value is it to him to destroy his credibility?

"That is another of the enigmas," was Mr. Marini's recent response.

Despite numerous reversals, Mr. Agca has never budged from his basic contention that Bulgaria, and thus the Soviet Union, commissioned and financed the plot to murder the Pope. With equal insistence, he continues to deny he was ever coached, as Bulgarian and Soviet officials have repeatedly suggested, to say so.

In Search of Evidence

Faced with a lack of hard evidence to back up Mr. Agca's statments, the prosecutor, Mr. Marini, has embarked on an oddysey to several European countries in search of further evidence from Turks whom Mr. Agca has named in the course of his testimony.

But the effort has thus far failed to resolve the puzzle surrounding the court's central witness.

In a brief statement in response to the plea that he undergo psychiatric testing, Mr. Agca, in eloquent Italian, told the court, "Certainly, do your analysis."

"I have a conscience, a mentality, that is different," he said. "You men of the planet Earth have yours."

Sanitized Copy Approved for Release 2010/08/23 : CIA-RDP90-00552R000505100046-2