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SUBJECT "The Man Who Shot the Pope"

BRYANT GUMBEL: In Closeup this morning, NBC News diplomatic correspondent Marvin Kalb joins us, he's with us in our Rome studios with a followup report on his controversial program "The Man Who Shot the Pope."

Good morning, Marvin.

MARVIN KALB: Good morning, Bryant.

That was four months ago and much has happened since then. The Turkish killer Mehmet Ali Agca has been in jail but he has been singing and the Italian judge has been listening. And an Austrian has been arrested, several Turks have been arrested, and a Bulgarian.

Let's take a look.

The silence ended last fall, in part because NBC's report encouraged others to follow the story. Then a confirming bombshell. On November 25th Italian police arrested a Bulgarian Sergei Ivanov Antonov, described as head of the Bulgarian airline office in Rome on charges of active complicity in the attempted assassination.

None plays a more central role than the Roman magistrate Ilario Martella. Cautious and courageous, with a reputation for honesty, Martella has been accumulating evidence for more than a year. He has said little, traveled much. To the United States, Turkey, West Germany, Switzerland, untangling a web of conspiracy that has its roots in Bulgaria.

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Omar Bacci, a Turk who helped Agca with the gun. He was arrested in Switzerland last summer, held at the Ragensdorf Prison near Zurich, until, at Martella's request, he was extradicted to Rome on October 16th, 1982.

Musa Chela Chelabi, another Turk implicated with Agca in the papal plot. He was arrested by West German police on November 3rd, extradicted to Rome on January 14th. He's now confessed to having death with Agca.

Horst Grumier, an Austrian arms smuggler, involved in getting the gun to Agca. He was arrested on January 11th, charged with smuggling new Soviet weapons across the Czechoslovak border into Austria. He is being held in the Kornuberg Prison outside of Vienna.

This stunning string of arrests and extradictions angered and alarmed Bulgaria and the Soviet Union. Both denied any involvement in the papal plot.

On December 17th what rarely happens in Bulgaria happened, foreign correspondents were invited to a news conference. Present for questioning were Bekir Celenk, a Turkish smuggler accused of having bankrolled the plot. Italy had issued a warrant for his arrest on October 26th. The Bulgarians put him under police custody on December 9th. Celenk posed as a hurt angelic innocent. Zhelyo Vasilev, former aide to the Bulgarian military attache in Rome, fingered by Agca, along with Antonov, an active accomplice in the plot. He, too, professed outrage and innocence.

And Totos Donanov Aivazov, described as a financial officer at the Bulgarian embassy. He had diplomatic immunity and could not be arrested.

These Bulgarians were known to Agca only by code names. He identified them from a batch of 56 photographs provided by Martella.

GUMBEL: Marvin, you've listed a string of arrests for us, we've heard the official government denials. What's the next step; where does the investigation go from here?

KALB: Well, Bryant, it appears that it's on the final lap for Judge Martella right now because, the old saying that there's no honor among thieves apparently is true. Everyone is talking, everyone is singing.

GUMBEL: Is this free from the realities of Italian politics? To what extent is Italian politics playing a role in the investigation?

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KALB: Well, I think that to a degree there is some role but the basic role is being played by the magistrates here, the judges. And they seem to be, for the most part -- for the most part -- immune to the full thrust of Italian politics.

GUMBEL: You mentioned at the tail end of your investigation -- of your report, rather, than administration officials, CIA officials, have been discouraging pursuit of the story by US newsmen. Why?

KALB: Well, Bryant, this is a very important and shocking detail that has come up. A number of key members of the CIA, both here and Rome and in Washington, have been actively discouraging American newsmen, as well as the Italian investigators from pursuing this story. In part, the reason lies in the fact that there are many in the US and Western Europe who would rather, at this point not be presented with evidence of Soviet complicity because in their minds it could very well shatter hopes and assumptions about detente, about trade, about the possibility of getting arms control agreements. They'd rather not know.

GUMBEL: All right, Marvin, thank you very much for joining us this morning.

KALB: Marvin's update on "The Man Who Shot the Pope" can be seen tonight on NBC, 8:00 o'clock Eastern Time and that'll be at 7:00 o'clock Central.