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FUGITIVES' TRACER VANISHES HIMSELF

Man Who Sought to Capture Vesco Fails to Appear for Meeting in Fraud Case

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 2 — Ernest R. Keiser, a man the Federal Government has relied on to bring back some of its most notorious fugitives, is now a fugitive himself. His disappearance has left behind a series of puzzling questions about his secretive life and his relationship with the Government.

It was Mr. Keiser, now 64 years old, who in 1982 lured back to the United States the former intelligence agent Edwin P. Wilson, then a fugitive in Libya, to which he had illegally supplied arms. Subsequently, according to Mr. Keiser, his attorney and Federal officials, he got involved in assisting the Justice Department in attempting to trap the financier Robert L. Vesco and other prominent fugitives.

On Thursday, Mr. Keiser's attorney, William Aronwald, told Federal prosecutors in Tampa, Fla., that Mr. Keiser had disappeared. Mr. Keiser, Mr. Aronwald said, had not shown up at a scheduled meeting in New York with probation officials in connection with his conviction last month in White Plains, N.Y., for larceny. A Justice Department spokesman, John Russell, said subsequently that the department would have no comment on Mr. Keiser or his case.

Warrants for Keiser and Wife

Mr. Keiser was scheduled to go on trial next week in Tampa on Federal charges of fraud. Judy Hoyer, an Assistant United States Attorney in Tampa, said arrest warrants were issued Thursday for Mr. Keiser and his wife, Bahira. Mrs. Keiser was scheduled to go on trial next week in Tampa on separate charges that she lied about the Keiser finances in connection with a bail hearing for Mr. Keiser.

The questions about Mr. Keiser touch on his relationships with various Government agencies and secret Government missions, his involvement in criminal activity, his true identity and even on place of birth.

In an interview last year, and in a partial biography he gave to associates, Mr. Keiser portrays himself as a secret Government "operative," involved in snaring Nazis hiding out in South America, illegally entering Communist countries to free dissidents, infiltrating high-level drug rings in the Middle East and South America and assisting the Central Intelligence Agency in the 1950's by secretly supplying guns in the Algerian war of independence.

Vesco Reported in Cuba

In the interview, Mr. Keiser described in detail his efforts, through a Mexican associate, to trap Mr. Vesco, who, according to Federal law-enforcement officials, is living in Cuba and is trying there to help the country obtain American technology. Mr. Vesco is wanted in connection with a \$224 million fraud case.

But court records, law-enforcement documents and Justice Department officials say the C.I.A. is prepared to testify that Mr. Keiser never had any relationship with the agency, that some of the exploits in the biography never occurred, in part because he was in jail, and that he has frequently been involved in illegal activities. But they acknowledge that he had been involved in some way in attempting to apprehend Mr. Vesco.

A key issue in the Tampa case, where Mr. Keiser is charged with defrauding an indicted banker of \$60,000 by promising to help fix his case, is Mr. Keiser's role in seeking to apprehend Mr. Vesco. An affidavit by an agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation says Mr. Keiser told the banker he could take care of his case.

Mr. Keiser's file in the Florida State Attorney's office for Broward County calls him an "internationally known swindler, who possibly may be living under an assumed name, and a false passport." In 1973, Mr. Keiser pleaded no contest to state larceny charges in Broward County. The files of Interpol, the Vienna-based world clearinghouse for police information, say Mr. Keiser has been arrested numerous times in several countries and served time in an Austrian prison after World War II.

Problem With Fingerprints

Law-enforcement officials have often questioned Mr. Keiser's true identity, according to the Broward County files, the Interpol files and testimony in Federal District Court in Tampa. Mr. Keiser has said he was born in New York in 1918, in a hospital that lost its birth records. Tracing Mr. Keiser's past is complicated by the fact that his fingerprints cannot be categorized by standard techniques, according to Florida records and Justice Department officials.

Last year Chris Hoyer, then a Federal prosecutor, told a Federal magistrate in Tampa that Mr. Keiser had "lied to you, to us — not just about his arrests, about where he was born, who he is, what he does, where's he from."

Mr. Hoyer went on: "From the best we can determine, he was born in Germany. In a sense, he's not a person."

Justice Department officials said the hospital where Mr. Keiser said he had been born had not lost its records and had no record of his birth. The officials also said the State Department, acting on behalf of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, had traced Mr. Keiser's birth to Germany. Mr. Keiser denies he was born there.

But E. Lawrence Barcella Jr., an Assistant United States Attorney in Washington, who had worked with Mr. Keiser in apprehending Mr. Wilson, told the Tampa magistrate he had checked out Mr. Keiser's background, found him to be reliable, and was sure Mr. Keiser would appear to face the fraud charges in Tampa.