

Ben Barka Case Still A Riddle

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PARIS, Oct. 1—The Picasso in the waiting room at Orly is bugged. The baggage of important people coming through the big Paris Airport is secretly searched. France's counter-spy agency regularly sends New Year's greetings to its "honorable correspondents."

These piquant tidbits from the secret service netherworld have come to light during the Ben Barka trial, which is still going on here. But after dozens of witnesses and four weeks of testimony in the gloomy Palais de Justice, the general questions of the affair still remain unanswered.

What did happen to Mehdi Ben Barka? The leftist Moroccan political leader was seized at mid-day on a busy Paris street last Oct. 29 by a mixed bag of gangsters, French police and a French counterspy "correspondent." This is known and admitted.

Second-Hand Account

But the last image of Ben Barka before the Assize Court is only a second-hand account. He was pictured bound to a furnace pipe in the cellar of Antoine Lopez, the diminutive and slippery counter-spy agent who is one of the six men on trial. This testimony came from a newspaperman who had it from a talkative gangster, one Georges Figon. And Figon can't testify. He was fatally shot, by his own hand the authorities say, last winter.

No trace of Ben Barka has been found. There has been no evidence so far to support the prevailing belief that Moroccan officials murdered him.

The other major and unanswered question is this: Did high French authorities cooperate with their Rabat counterparts to make Ben Barka vanish? Again, there has been no evidence to support such a view.

Police Less Than Zealous

However, out of their own mouths, it is clear that the French counterspy agency was remarkably indifferent to advance warnings about Ben Barka's fate and French police were something less than zealous in pursuing a case involving their own.

The spy watchers, the Service de Documentation Extérieure et de Contre Espionage (SDECE), learned five months before the kidnaping that "unorthodox" means to grab Ben Barka were being planned. A month before the crime, the agency knew that a "special team" had been named to "approach" the victim.

But SDECE's former boss, Gen. Paul Jacquier, testified that these words didn't mean anything very much. In his world, he said, that sort of language could refer to an unconventional research project. Jacquier, however, did let something important slip out. By Nov. 2, three days after the seizure, he said, "Everybody in my entourage knew that Oufkir and Dlimi were in the affair."

Now Mohammed Oufkir is Morocco's Minister of Interior, Ahmed Dlimi is the chief of police and both were still very much in France at that time. For still inexplicable reasons, Jacquier did not pass on what he knew to the French police.

Indeed, a day later, Oufkir and Dlimi were given a cocktail party at the French Ministry of the Interior and they dined that night with some of the highest police officials in France.

Face Trial in Absentia

By then, the police did have some hint of a clue that Oufkir and company were behind the affair. The Interior Minister, Rober Frey, suggested that one of his aides discreetly sound out Oufkir at dinner. A polite question was put, a vague answer received, and both the Moroccans took off next morning for Rabat, where they have prudently stayed ever since. The two are scheduled to be tried in absentia after the current trial finally ends.

A long parade of leading French police have appeared in court to say they did no wrong, to insist that they had no grounds for arresting so distinguished a man as Oufkir and his slightly less distin-

guished aide.

In fairness to the police, they were getting precious little cooperation from Jacquier's agency and weren't much help to each other.

The lawyers for Ben Barka's family and others watching the tortuous trial are not content with this. They had hoped to get more light from Interior Minister Frey as well as from Premier Georges Pompidou.

But the judge, Jean Perez, the Pickwickian presiding magistrate, has ruled that they must be satisfied with written replies to some edited questions. It is not likely that Frey and Pompidou will give away anything to compromise their government.