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Betrayals, false alibis, and bungling by the pope's would-be assassins.

THE GREAT BULGARIAN COVER-UP

BY CLAIRE STERLING

ON MAY 27 three Bulgarians and four Turks will stand trial in the Italian Court of Assizes for conspiring to assassinate Pope John Paul II on May 13, 1981. In the tortuous confession of Mehmet Ali Agca, the convicted gunman in the case, one thing became clear. This painstakingly conceived plot (aimed ultimately at bringing down the Solidarity movement in Poland, and including at one point the murder of Lech Walesa) came undone by the cowardice, stupidity, and mutual betrayals of the accomplices—an assortment of Bulgarian Embassy and secret service personnel; Turkish drug- and gun-runners, professional assassins, Gray Wolves, and Mafia men. In each man's attempt to save himself, he brought further evidence against his comrades. The result was a farcical cover-up attempt scrupulously unveiled by Judge Ilario Martella.

All of the accused lied stoutly to the judge, as did Agca. But the others' testimony fell to pieces under severe magisterial scrutiny; the core of Mehmet Ali Agca's confession held up—despite numerous inconsistencies and even several retractions along the way. Prying the truth out of Agca, imprisoned for life at 23, proved to be an arduous and disconcerting task. To break out of jail by force, he needed the assistance of his Turkish and Bulgarian accomplices. To walk out a free man, he had to betray them: tell everything he knew and hope to win a presidential pardon. He gambled on the pardon, but could not bring himself fully to renounce the other course.

Agca was arrested on May 13, 1981. He held out for a year before naming his Turkish accomplices, and another six months before identifying the Bulgarians, in the conviction that rescue was on the way. During that time, he misled his Italian interrogators, mixing, he said, "some facts with a lot of lies . . . to prevent them from getting near the truth." He later explained that he was keeping a promise made to his friend and fellow gunman Oral Celik, and to the Bulgarians in Rome. In return, "They assured me that they would arrange my escape if I was arrested, by buying off my prison guards, or kidnapping a hostage for exchange."

As the months went by with no sign of deliverance, Agca saw that those he counted on for help were not omnipotent. By the time of the pope's pardon at Christmas 1983, Agca had taken back some of his lies, and he

began to supply new details about the assassination plot. Through the Turkish Mafia boss Bekir Celenk—bound to the Bulgarian secret services after running his arms and drug traffic out of Sofia for 20-odd years—the Bulgarian services hired Agca and Celik to be the hit men. Judge Martella described Agca, who had moved in right-wing Gray Wolves circles since high school, as a "terrorist without ideology," and an "exceptionally gifted killer used for exceptional assignments and paid accordingly." He was to be paid one million deutsche marks (roughly \$400,000) for killing the pope.

Elaborate liaisons were set up between the Bulgarians and Turks, with the Gray Wolves providing safe houses, protective cover, storage of weapons, and petty cash outlays as needed. In July 1980 in Sofia, the plan to kill the pope was roughed out in meetings between Agca, Celenk, Celik, and the treasurer of the Bulgarian Embassy, Todor Aivasov (alias Sotir Kolev). It was perfected later in Zurich and Rome. For the next nine months, Agca set up working contacts across the continent, carefully covering up his movements as he went. It was at the moment of the shooting and in the arrangements for safe flight afterward that the plan broke down.

The assignments were clearly set up in advance. The Gray Wolves leader Omer Bagci would deliver the gun. Agca and Celik would do the shooting. The Bulgarians Aivasov and Zhelyo Vasilev (alias Sotir Petrov) would hire the car (to be driven by Sergei Antonov—alias Bayramic—the deputy director of Balkan Air) and would procure panic bombs with which Celik would distract the crowd for the getaway. At a dinner when these arrangements were discussed, Vasilev first mentioned a detail with damning implications for Bulgaria. He said that a TIR truck (Transport International Routier—a vehicle used to shuttle cargo across borders of European countries without customs clearance) carrying diplomats' household goods would be ready to whisk Agca and Celik out of Italy after the shooting.

On May 13, 1981, Agca and Celik took up their positions at the Vatican in a large crowd gathered for the pope's weekly public audience. Agca was to fire five shots, after which Celik—who could then fire if necessary—would explode the panic bomb. But Agca managed to fire only twice before somebody shoved his shooting arm. Only one of the bullets struck the pope. Celik then fired a third shot, hitting the pope again. But instead of setting off the panic bomb, he simply ran away. ABC's Lowell Newton, a

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few yards off, snapped his famous photograph of Celik fleeing the scene. Celik escaped and has not been heard from since.

On November 8, 1982, Agca identified his three Bulgarian accomplices from mug shots, and told the judge that they promised to get him out of St. Peter's Square by car, and out of Italy in a TIR truck carrying diplomats' furnishings. The Italian police found striking evidence to that effect. Less than two hours after the pope was shot, a Bulgarian TIR truck left the Bulgarian Embassy in Rome for the Yugoslav frontier and Sofia. The embassy had urgently requested the TIR's free passage across Italian borders, with customs clearance on the embassy grounds—a rare and expensive procedure. The state prosecutor, Antonio Albano, concluded that hidden among the books, crockery, and personal effects listed on the truck's manifest that day was Oral Celik.

Agca proved to be extraordinarily precise in his descriptions of his accomplices and the places and times of meetings. All those he named as collaborators turned out to have been where he said they were at the crucial times between July 1980 and May 1981.

Sergei Antonov was in Rome in November and December 1980, and January, April, and May 1981. He spent the New Year in Sofia, but was back in Italy by January 5, in time for two meetings Agca spoke of that took place around January 15, in which Agca, the three Bulgarians, and a fourth Bulgarian agent discussed a subplot, later abandoned, to kill Lech Walesa while he had his audience with the pope in Rome. Todor Aivasov was in Sofia from July 21 to August 29, 1980—the dates Agca said he met with him (though Agca knew him under his alias, "Kolev")—and in Rome for all the relevant months thereafter. Zhelyo Vasilev was also in Rome throughout those months (though he had been commuting between Rome and Sofia until early August 1980). Among the Turkish plotters, Musa Serdar Celebi was in

Milan to meet Agca in December 1980, and in Zurich on March 31, 1981, when he was seen with Agca at the Sheraton Hotel. Bekir Celenk was at the Hotel Vitosha in Sofia in 1980 on July 11-12 and July 24-August 1, as Agca had said. He was also at the Hotel Piraeus Park in Athens during the first days of May 1981, when Agca claimed to have phoned him there. Omer Mersan stayed in room 911 of the Hotel Vitosha on July 4-5, 1980, when Agca said he'd first met him there, and again from July 22 to August 10.

The Bulgarians attempted to nail Agca as an incorrigible liar, insisting that he was part of an imperial plot against Eastern Europe, and that he had been visited in prison by the CIA or the Italian security services, or both. But their own lies quickly became evident. The Bulgarian magistrates gave Judge Martella several documents purportedly demonstrating that Agca could not have met Mersan in Sofia on July 4 and 5. One was a list compiled by Bulgarian frontier police of Mersan's numerous border crossings throughout 1980. It showed him leaving Bulgaria June 26 and returning July 22, not July 4 and 5. A letter from the Hotel Vitosha's director listed every occupant of room 911 from October 1979 to May 1981. Mersan showed up for July 22, 1980, but not for July 4 and 5.

Judge Martella asked the West German police for a photocopy of Mersan's passport. It showed his entry into Bulgaria on July 4, and exit on July 5. A stamped notation added: "TK-Balkan Tourist Sofia—Hotel Vitosha—arrived July 4, 1980—departed July 5, 1980." When Judge Martella called "this grave discrepancy" to the Bulgarians' attention, they promised "a swift investigation and reply." None arrived.

Agca's descriptions of Antonov were accurate down to his mastery of English, his eye defect, and his wife's nickname. Antonov told the judge he could not understand how Agca knew so much about him, yet under interrogation he confirmed every detail. His admission that he spoke some English shattered a major Bulgarian argument



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THE AGCA SAGA

Mehmet Ali Agca, a young Turkish mercenary, was convicted of shooting Pope John Paul II. In his testimony, Agca implicated five Turks—four of whom will be tried—and three Bulgarians. Their alleged roles in the plot are as follows.

Oral Celik, a boyhood friend of Agca and his accomplice in the shooting. He has not been seen since, and apparently escaped from Italy in a sealed Bulgarian Embassy truck. Celik had been involved in arms- and drugs-running for . . .

Bekir Celenk, a Turkish Mafia boss who worked out of Bulgaria. After the shooting he took refuge in Sofia. He will be tried in absentia. Celenk was the Bulgarian secret services' contact man for hiring the two Turkish gunmen, whom he located through . . .

Omer Mersan, a Munich-based businessman and smuggler. Mersan told

all to Italian authorities in April 1984 and was released. He will not be tried. In particular, he told of his ties to the Turkish arms Mafia and to Celenk, who was coordinating his own Mafia resources and contacts with those of . . .

Musa Serdar Celebi, a Munich-based leader of a Turkish terrorist organization called the Gray Wolves. Celebi is now awaiting trial in jail in Italy. He was the go-between for Celenk and Agca and gave them access to the resources of the Gray Wolves throughout Europe, including the services of . . .

Omer Bagci, a Gray Wolves leader based in Switzerland, now awaiting trial in Italy. He kept the Browning automatic Agca was to use to shoot the pope, and had it delivered to him in Milan.

The following Bulgarians were indicted and are still in jail in Italy:

Zhelyo Vasilev (alias **Sotir Petrov**),

secretary to the military attaché at the Bulgarian Embassy, came up with the plans for Agca and Celik to be spirited off in the embassy truck. His arrest was ordered in November 1982, after he had fled to Sofia. He has been silent under interrogation, but was apparently helped in these arrangements by . . .

Todor Aivasov (alias **Sotir Kolev**), treasurer of the Bulgarian Embassy in Rome, allegedly met with Celenk, Celik, and Agca in Sofia throughout the summer of 1980. His arrest was ordered after he had fled to Sofia, and he has stuck ever since to an increasingly complex alibi, as has . . .

Sergei Antonov (alias **Bayramic**), deputy director of Balkan Air. Antonov was supposed to drive the getaway car from the assassination site. He claimed to have been at the airline's offices with six other people throughout the day of the assassination. The corroborating testimony of all six fell apart under cross-examination.

in his defense—that Antonov could not have communicated with Agca, since he spoke no English. Judge Martella concluded that Antonov was "unable to offer a single element giving the lie to his accuser." His defense was "devoid of judicial force, contrived because born late and therefore suspect, and characterized by irreconcilable contradictions."

The rise and fall of Antonov's alibi had its comical side. He was arrested on November 25, 1982. At the time he said he remembered nothing about the day of the shooting. Three weeks later, he produced six witnesses to swear that he was in the Balkan Air office throughout that fateful afternoon.

All six worked for Balkan Air or Balkan Tourist, in the next room; and all were "clearly reciting a part," said the judge. Just after Antonov's arrest, his office mate, Svetana Blagoeva, had testified "that she and she alone" was in the office with Antonov from 1:30 p.m. to 6 p.m. on May 13. Silva Popkresteva had sworn she'd worked only that morning, and had no knowledge of the afternoon. Interrogated a month later ("at Antonov's request," the judge noted) Svetana Blagoeva "remembered" that Silva Popkresteva was there in the afternoon after all. Popkresteva recalled that too. And Blagoeva's 80-year-old mother remembered phoning her at the office "around 5 p.m." to say she'd seen the shooting of the pope on TV. Blagoeva, Popkresteva, Antonov, and four other Balkan Air employees now distinctly recalled the 5:30 p.m. phone call. Indeed, they all insisted that Antonov had answered the phone

himself. He concurred. The timing alone made this a wasted effort: the first TV film on the papal shooting was not shown until 7 p.m.

Todor Aivasov's alibi was four months in the making. After offering none to speak of on March 3, 1983, he came up with a dazzling account the following July 17. Judge Martella found it to be "amply disavowed, contrived, not responding to the truth, and wholly unworthy of notice."

The account covered most of Aivasov's waking moments from May 11 to the hour of the shooting on May 13. On May 11, he said, he and an embassy driver named Tchotov picked up a cargo of bicycles from a shop in Rome at 4 p.m. and shipped them from the airport at 5 p.m. Tchotov proved to be a thoroughly unreliable witness, who finally admitted to having been "instructed" or "helped to remember" in advance. Other witnesses, documents in hand, established the hours in question as 5 p.m. and 6:10 p.m., respectively. Thus Aivasov could easily have inspected St. Peter's with Agca in the early afternoon.

Aivasov maintained that practically all of May 12 was devoted to clearing customs for a TIR truck. He cited as witnesses two Italian customs inspectors, a brigadier of the Financial Police, the TIR's Bulgarian driver, and Svetana Blagoeva. Aivasov and Blagoeva swore they had picked up the Italians at the customs house, taken them to lunch, then watched them clear some wine and spirits cargo at the Bulgarian Embassy. But the two customs inspectors remembered a lunch with a Bulgarian who evidently was not Aivasov: the description offered by one

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bore no resemblance to him, and neither could identify him from the mug shots. Neither recalled the presence of Blagoeva or any other woman.

The brigadier of the Financial Police, Maurizio Luchetta, started by saying he had no recollection of the lunch, or the lady's presence, or Aivasov's presence. Interrogated again three days later, he unexpectedly recalled seeing Aivasov at the embassy on May 12, but said Aivasov had "absented himself from the scene between 2 [p.m.] and 4 p.m., saying he had something else to do." (According to Agca, Aivasov was in St. Peter's Square from around 2 p.m. to 3 p.m. on May 12.) Three months later, Luchetta remembered that he had driven to the embassy on May 12 with Aivasov and "a lady," and did lunch with the others. Judge Martella ordered his arrest for false testimony, stating that his "multiple and contradictory statements" reflected a "confused mind" with "an enormous capacity to contaminate the investigation."

For the crucial afternoon of May 13, Aivasov claimed to have been immersed again in the business of the TIR truck. Loaded for departure with 44 cases of books, crockery, and other items, it had to be cleared on embassy grounds. Once more Aivasov maintained that he went to the customs house with his driver, Tchotov, around 11 a.m., picked up one of the same customs inspectors (Epifanio Scalera), and stopped for lunch at a restaurant of Scalera's choosing. Back at the embassy around 3:30 p.m., Aivasov continued, he had an appointment with an Italian circus impresario. At 5 p.m. he met with an Italian theater club director to settle plans for a Bulgarian theatrical performance.

The customs inspector testified that Aivasov's account was "invented out of whole cloth." The inspector had never heard of the restaurant Aivasov said he had chosen, and had not in any case had lunch with anybody there on May 13 or any other day. The driver Tchotov admitted that, before coming to see the judge, he had been summoned for a word with Aivasov in Sofia. "In all conscience I must say . . . that Mr. Aivasov showed me a document dated May 13, 1981, and I could have confused the date and the person who came to lunch with us." The Italian impresario testified that he had gone to the embassy in the morning, gone to lunch with the Bulgarian consul, said good-bye at the embassy gates around 2:30 p.m., and taken off for home. He said he did not meet Todor Aivasov until six months later. The Italian theater club director exhibited her diary, with all the details of the Bulgarian theater performance. It showed that she had settled everything with a "Signor Ivazov," not on May 13 but on May 8. That was her last appointment with him.

Zhelyo Vasilev, unmistakably the highest-ranking of the three Bulgarians, was the least talkative. He denied everything and offered no alibis.

THE TURKS' fabrications were no less preposterous. The Gray Wolves leader based in Munich, Musa Serdar Celebi, imprisoned since early November 1982, had the dubious distinction of being the first defendant whose egregious lies gave Agca's story a ring of truth. Martella

wrote, "The reticence, contradictions, and proven falsity of his declarations, [and] his absolute helplessness to put up a valid line of defense . . . provided the most suitable corroboration for Agca's story."

Bekir Celenk, protesting that he was just a dealer in mineral water, claimed he had never met Agca, scarcely knew Omer Mersan, had met Musa Serdar Celebi just once at lunch with a Turkish movie producer, and had never done business with Bulgaria's notorious state enterprise, Kintex. But Mersan finally admitted to knowing Celenk since 1979 and presenting him to Agca. Celebi was close enough to be going into partnership with him in Munich. The Turkish movie producer proved to be a fugitive dope trafficker who, together with Celenk, was wanted in Europe for a huge heroin deal. And Celenk's dealings with Kintex were a matter of court record in several countries.

Surveying the ruins of Celenk's alibi, the judge noted two significant facts. No sooner had Celenk learned there was an Italian arrest warrant out for him than he fled Munich and headed straight for Bulgaria. And no sooner did he get there than the Bulgarian authorities put him "under control" and took his passport away. He cannot leave the country, let alone talk freely. He will be tried in absentia in Rome.

Omer Mersan was arrested in Munich on Judge Martella's warrant as "a false and reticent witness," and extradited to Italy in April 1984, where he was confronted with hard evidence of his gangster connections. Martella had learned that Mersan was up to his neck in the Turkish Mafia's contraband traffic, that he carried 50 false passports, had excellent working relationships with Bulgarian and Turkish customs police, was on intimate terms with the director of the Hotel Vitosha in Sofia, and hobnobbed with high-ranking Bulgarian officials. Faced with such testimony and a long spell in jail, Mersan confessed to practically everything Agca had said about him. In the end Mersan was released and sent back to Germany.

ALL OF these fallacies helped to verify Agca's story. This is not to say that in the course of his confession he made an honest man of himself. As the investigation drew toward a close in the summer of 1983, Agca retracted a number of things he had said over the previous year. He said that he hadn't known where Antonov worked before his arrest, or visited his home; that he and Antonov had not, as he had formerly insisted, actually carried explosives to the Hotel Victoria in Rome when Lech Walesa was there. He claimed to have picked up details of this sort from newspapers and television, an interpreter who let him see a phone book (where he found Balkan Air's number), and magistrates talking within earshot or informing him of something as they were obliged to do by law.

"The Retraction," as it came to be called, caused an uproar in the press and will doubtless be used by the Bulgarians' lawyers as a dramatic centerpiece in the courtroom. Nevertheless, it did not contradict the body of Agca's confession. The details he had found this way were few and minor, the mass of corroborated evidence was

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intact—as Agca himself pointed out. “The plot against the pope as I described it was real, and I want to reaffirm the complicity of those I named,” he declared.

On January 27, 1984, when Agca had gone over every line of his testimony with Judge Martella before swearing to it, he was given a solemn warning. If he was falsely accusing innocent people, he could get anywhere from four to 20 more years tacked on to his life sentence. For “so grave and infamous a crime of slander,” furthermore, he would lose any frail hope of presidential clemency. “If, on the other hand, you have committed slander and will redress that before the investigation ends, your conduct may

be evaluated positively to obtain the benefit of Article 87 of the Italian Constitution: a pardon granted by the president of the Republic. I invite you to reflect before you reply.”

Agca answered, “I perfectly understand that if I have accused innocent people, I would lose all chance of regaining my liberty. On that premise, I repeat that the persons I have accused—Sergei Antonov, Todor Aivasov, Zhelyo Vasilev, Bekir Celenk, Oral Celik, Musa Serdar Celebi, Omer Bagci—were my accomplices in the attempt to assassinate Pope John Paul II.” Whether that was the whole truth and nothing but the truth remains for a judge of the Italian Court of Assizes and six popular jurors to decide.