

ITALY

Agca Points the Finger

Mehmet Ali Agca seemed surprisingly relaxed as he was led down the steps of police headquarters in Rome. Dressed in jeans and a warm-up jacket and flanked by two guards, the man convicted of shooting Pope John Paul II fielded questions from a cluster of reporters. As Agca climbed into the back of a blue-and-white van, the impromptu press conference took an unexpected turn. Asked who else was involved in the attempt on the pope, he suddenly shouted: "The Bulgarian secret service." The reporters pressed him for details. "And the KGB?" they yelled. "Yes, and the KGB," he shot back. "[I have been] trained specially by the KGB [in] international terrorism. I have been trained also in Bulgaria."

Agca's outburst marked the first time he has stated publicly what he has been telling Italian investigators in private for months—that the Soviets and Bulgarians masterminded his attack on the pope. Italian authorities insisted that Agca had been brought to police headquarters only for questioning in connection with the recent kidnapping of a Vatican employee's daughter. The kidnapers had demanded Agca's release. But in taking the wraps off Agca and tipping reporters to his appearance in advance, Italian authorities allowed him to openly finger the KGB in the assassination attempt on the pope.

Police at the scene made no attempt to gag Agca. He told the reporters that Syrian agents

had instructed him in terrorist techniques and that he had spent time in the Soviet Union, though he maintained that the Kremlin had taken no direct hand in the shooting. In his litany of accusations, he named three other suspects in the plot—Sergei Antonov, a Bulgarian airline official now facing complicity charges in Rome, and former Bulgarian Embassy officials Todor Ayzavov and Zhelyu Kolev—as his accomplices.

Solitary: In making the charges, Agca scarcely resembled the surly Turkish terrorist who two years ago drew a life sentence for the shooting in St. Peter's Square. In contrast to his sometimes incoherent testimony and withdrawn manner during the trial, he appeared calm and rational. His close-cropped hair is now flecked with gray, but he looked remarkably fit after two years in solitary confinement. He had regained most of the weight he lost while staging a brief hunger strike, and he displayed considerable energy—if not fluency—in his exchange with the gathered newsmen.

"Were you ever in the Soviet Union?" one reporter yelled.

"No, I have been in the Soviet Union but it doesn't matter," Agca responded. "The Soviet Union doesn't have any direct connection by the terrorist. It uses in the Middle East, Syria. In Europe, Bulgaria. I have enough proofs for pope assassination for every action."

"Was Antonov involved?" another newsmen asked.

"I said Sergei Antonov was with me during attempts," Agca answered.

In an apparent effort to give the prisoner more time to respond to questions, a plainclothes officer whispered to the guards to proceed "slowly, slowly." Then the driver of the van let the engine idle for several minutes. Italian officials angrily rejected any suggestion that they had stage-managed the exchange. "Absolutely not," said one investigator. "It was something that just happened." But Antonov's attorney, Giuseppe Consolo, argued otherwise. "The police did nothing to move him away from the journalists. It was incredible, absolutely incredible, to watch him repeat everything he probably told the judge," Consolo said. "I cannot believe the police didn't have precise orders to let Agca talk."

Innocent: Ostensibly, Agca had gone to police headquarters only to answer questions about the kidnapping of 15-year-old Emanuela Orlandi. The girl, whose father is a messenger in the Vatican, disappeared on June 22. A few days later, an anonymous caller to an Italian news agency demanded that Agca be freed in return for Emanuela. Investigators had been unsure whether the kidnapers had any connection with Agca. The interrogation last week apparently satisfied them that he knew nothing about the case. Outside the police station Agca called on the kidnapers to "free the poor innocent girl."

Both the Soviet and Bulgarian governments sharply denied Agca's charges. "There are absolutely no facts to bear out, directly or indirectly, the socialist countries' complicity in this heinous crime," Moscow

said in an official statement. But the Soviet Union's protestations of innocence looked thinner than ever. Italian Magistrate Ilario Martella is expected to complete his 20-month investigation into the papal plot sometime in late August. And if Agca's outburst last week offered any clue, Martella is certain to find that the trail of the pope's would-be assassins extended far beyond St. Peter's Square.

BILL HEWITT with
ANDREW NAGORSKI and
ELAINE SCIOLINO in Rome