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Jury Convicts Ray Of Prison Escape; He Gets 1 to 2 Years

WARTBURG, Tenn., Oct. 27 (AP)—James Earl Ray, serving a 99-year term for the murder of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., was convicted today of escaping from a Tennessee prison last June 10.

The jury returned the verdict after almost three hours of deliberation. They also imposed the minimum sentence allowed under state laws on escape—one to two years, to be served in addition to his regular sentence.

Prior to today's conviction, the 49-year-old convict would have been eligible for parole in 1998.

Mr. Ray testified today as the only defense witness that he made the escape in an effort to win a new trial for the slaying in Memphis on April 4, 1968, of Dr. King, to which he originally pleaded guilty.

Mr. Ray's attorney, Mark Lane, asked Mr. Ray what he did last June 10. Mr. Ray replied, "I escaped from the Petros prison." He was referring to Brushy Mountain, about 10 miles east of Wartburg and 40 miles east of Knoxville, Tenn.

Sought a New Trial

When Mr. Lane asked his client why he climbed the prison wall, Mr. Ray said, "It was my intention after I was out a couple of months to make some arrangements with the Attorney General, General Bell, for a new trial in the King case." He referred to Attorney General Griffin B. Bell.

"Why did you choose this method?" Mr. Lane asked. "I don't think there was any other method available," his client replied.

On cross-examination, the prosecutor asked Mr. Ray why he planned to wait two months before getting in touch with the authorities.

"I assumed it would take that long to get to Illinois or Canada," Mr. Ray said.

"You intended to leave the country?" the prosecutor asked.

"Not exactly," Mr. Ray replied. "I just wanted to get up north or into Canada."

At the trial's outset, the judge rebuffed Mr. Lane's initial attempt to discuss the murder of Dr. King and seated the nine-man, three-woman jury.

Mr. Lane had argued that his client was illegally confined and therefore innocent of illegal escape.