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James Earl Ray, 70, Killer of Dr. King, Dies in Nashville

By LAWRENCE VAN GELDER

James Earl Ray died yesterday at Columbia Nashville Memorial Hospital in Nashville while serving a 99-year sentence for the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. To the end of his life, he tantalized America with suggestions that his confession to the 1968 murder, which he had swiftly recanted, amounted to a lie. He was 70.

For the last two years, Mr. Ray, who was imprisoned in Nashville, had been treated repeatedly for liver disease at the hospital where he died. The Tennessee Department of Correction attributed his death to that illness and kidney failure.

Mr. Ray pleaded guilty to the King assassination in March 1969, avoiding the possibility of the death sentence that could have resulted from conviction at trial. Then, for the next three decades, he maintained that far from taking the life of the nation's leading civil rights figure, in a shooting in Memphis that set off racial disturbances in at least 100 cities, he had been "set up," used as an errand boy and decoy by shadowy conspirators who included a mystery man he knew only as Raoul.

In the last year or so of his life, with his health continuing to fail, Mr. Ray's quest to stand trial gained momentum. His lawyer, William F. Pepper, who promoted the notion that the Army and Federal intelligence agencies had conspired to kill

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Dr. King, was granted new ballistics tests. They failed to establish whether a rifle belonging to Mr. Ray had been the murder weapon as prosecutors maintained, but in the meantime Mr. Ray had found allies in the King family itself.

In March 1997, one of Dr. King's two sons, Dexter Scott King, went to Nashville to meet with Mr. Ray and told him that the family believed in his innocence. Like Mr. Pepper, Mr. King suggested that the Army and intelligence agencies had been involved in the assassination.

For all of Mr. Ray's efforts, for all his hinting and insinuation, he never shed any genuinely fresh light on the case. Despite his challenges to it, his guilty plea was upheld repeatedly by state and Federal courts alike. And when he died yesterday, the most exhaustive official investigation of the case ever conducted, by a Congressional committee, remained basically uncontested; the committee concluded in 1978 that although others might have been involved in the assassination, the killer was Mr. Ray.

Mr. Ray's death coincided with the publication of "Killing the Dream," a new book by Gerald Posner. In a review on Wednesday in The New York Times, Richard Bernstein called it "the most comprehensive and definitive study" of the assassination to date and summarized its conclusions by saying:

"James Earl Ray murdered the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. There is no evidence to support Mr. Ray's 30-year-old contention that he was a patsy drawn into an assassination conspiracy, or that a mysterious figure named Raoul was actually the killer, or that the F.B.I. and the C.I.A. have worked to cover up the truth about Dr. King's murder."

In Memphis yesterday, John Campbell, the lead prosecutor in the Ray case for the last four years, said: "He killed one of the greatest men of this century by his own admission, and he spent his life in prison. And justice has been served."

But in Atlanta, Dr. King's widow, Coretta Scott King, issued a statement that said:

"This is a tragedy, not only for Mr. Ray and his family but also for the entire nation. America will never have the benefit of Mr. Ray's trial, which would have produced new revelations about the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., as well as establish the facts concerning Mr. Ray's innocence.

"The King family has asked President Clinton and Attorney General Reno to conduct a full investigation of all new and unexamined evidence related to the assassination and to establish a Truth and Reconciliation Commission that would grant amnesty and immunity from prosecution for all those who come forward with information."

An Inept Drifter Filled With a Hatred of Blacks

Long before the act that made him a figure of worldwide infamy, the man imprisoned for killing Martin Luther King had become a drifter prone to inept holdups and burglaries that had caused him to serve more than 13 years in penitentiaries where he became notorious for bizarre and sometimes successful escape attempts. By the accounts of family and associates, he was intensely passionate in his hatred of blacks

and especially of Dr. King, who had become the nation's pre-eminent civil rights leader.

Dr. King was in Memphis to support a strike by sanitation workers when, on April 4, 1968, he was shot in the jaw while standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel. He died almost immediately.

The assassination touched off a manhunt that would last two months and span the Atlantic, although the first clues in the search for the killer were close at hand.

A Remington .30-06 hunting rifle determined to be the murder weapon was found on a sidewalk about a block from the motel, almost directly in front of a rooming house where a man had registered that afternoon under the name Eric Starvo Galt. The Memphis police found that a dresser had been moved in front of a window in Mr. Galt's room and a chair drawn up so that the Lorraine Motel could be seen from it.

A white Mustang in which a man had fled the scene of the slaying was also found to have been registered to Eric Galt, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation traced the serial number on the rifle to Birmingham, Ala., where the weapon had been sold to a man named Harvey Lowmyer.

Galt and Lowmyer, it turned out, were aliases that had been used by Mr. Ray.

'If I Inform and Get Out, I'll Get Murdered'

Mr. Ray spent several weeks in Toronto immediately after the assassination. Then he flew to London, to Portugal and then back to London, where he was captured by Scotland Yard on June 8 as he was about to board a flight to Belgium. In his possession were two Canadian passports and a loaded gun.

Back in Memphis on March 10, 1969, his 41st birthday, Mr. Ray stood before Judge W. Preston Battle of Shelby County Criminal Court, pleaded guilty to the murder of Dr. King and was sentenced to 99 years' imprisonment, with no eligibility for parole before serving half that term. The plea, which waived his right to trial, enabled him to escape the electric chair.

At one point in that hearing, both the prosecutor, P. M. Canale, and Mr. Ray's lawyer, Percy Foreman, told the court that there was no evidence that anyone else had conspired with Mr. Ray to kill Dr. King. But the defendant then leaped to his feet and declared that he did not intend that his guilty plea be construed as meaning that there had been no conspiracy.

In the quarter-century since, the idea that Dr. King was a victim of conspirators has refused to die. Indeed, in 1978, at the end of its two-year inquiry that also looked into the slaying of President John F. Kennedy, the House Select Committee on Assassinations concluded that although it was Mr. Ray who had fired the shot that killed Dr. King, circumstantial evidence pointed to the "likelihood" of a conspiracy. (The committee also concluded that President Kennedy "was probably assassinated as a result of a conspiracy.")

In any event, only three days after entering his guilty plea Mr. Ray wrote the judge that he wanted to withdraw it. Within a week he sought a trial, an effort that would last till he died. Testifying in 1974 in furtherance of that effort, he maintained that his involvement in the assassination had been only peripheral but that Mr. Foreman, his lawyer, had seemed intent on persuading him to plead guilty. He went along, he said, because he believed that otherwise Mr. Foreman might "fake" a defense at trial and that he might then be executed.

But if his own role was peripheral, whose was central? Mr. Ray never told all that he said he knew.

"If I inform and get out," he once said to an interviewer in prison, "they will solve their case. I'll go back to the Missouri penitentiary where I owe them 15 years, and I'll get murdered as an informer. So if I inform it will work out for them, but it won't work out so well for me."

Mr. Ray was a fugitive from that Missouri prison at the time of the assassination, having escaped on April 23, 1967, while serving a sentence for a holdup. In the year between that escape and Dr. King's murder, conspiracy theorists wondered, where did he find the money to live on?

Mr. Canale, the prosecutor in the assassination case, said Mr. Ray had saved a considerable sum while in the Missouri prison. Although the prosecutor would not specify the source, the money was believed to have come from the sale of drugs smuggled in.

But Mr. Ray once told the writer William Bradford Huie that a blond Cuban whom he knew only as Raoul had kept him supplied with money for months after his escape while planning a "big" job for him, presumably the assassination of Dr. King. And it was Raoul, Mr. Ray said, to whom he gave the murder weapon before the assassination. The House committee of inquiry, however, later determined that none of this was worthy of belief.

Bungled Petty Crime And Repeated Escapes

Even if there had been no conspiracy theories, Mr. Ray would hardly have faded from public notice. Besides hiring and firing lawyers, recanting his admission of guilt, filing appeals and giving interviews, he continued to make news with escape attempts.

In 1977, he and six other convicts used a

makeshift ladder to scale the 14-foot-high walls of the Brushy Mountain Penitentiary in Petros, Tenn., while guards were distracted by a fight staged by prisoners some 200 yards away. One man was shot off the wall, but Mr. Ray and the others escaped into the night in snake-infested Smoky Mountain country.

Prison officials said the break, carried out with almost flawless precision, had been conceived and executed by Mr. Ray, who was recaptured not far away after 54 hours.

(The last of his companions was seized 24 hours after that.)

That escape attempt was Mr. Ray's third after his imprisonment for the King murder. In 1971, he had slipped from his cell and left behind a dummy in his bunk but had been captured trying to make his way through a steam tunnel. And in 1972, he had slipped away from his work area but been caught trying to cut a hole through the ceiling.

After his capture in 1977, two years were added to his sentence. But he was to try again: in 1979, a guard saw him crawling along the base of a prison wall at 2:05 A.M. under a green camouflage blanket.

Mr. Ray himself became the target of a murder attempt in 1981, when four other inmates jumped him in a library at the Brushy Mountain prison. He was stabbed 22 times with a homemade knife, and 77 stitches were needed to close his wounds. Although he refused to identify his assailants, three black prisoners were later convicted of the attack, and 20 to 60 years were added to their sentences.

If Mr. Ray had much of a reputation as an escape artist, it stood in sharp contrast to his record as a criminal of noteworthy ineptitude.

His career in crime began almost half a century ago, on the day when he was surprised in the course of an apparent burglary in Los Angeles and left behind his identification. He received a suspended sentence.

He had drifted to Los Angeles from Chicago, where he now returned and, in 1952, robbed a taxi driver of $11 at gunpoint. In his effort to flee, he ducked into an alley that proved to be a dead end. When he tried to climb a wall, the police shot him.

He was released from prison in 1954 but was convicted in Kansas City, Mo., the following year for cashing forged money orders. He spent three more years in prison, then moved to St. Louis, where his arrest after a grocery store holdup in 1959 led to a 20-year sentence.

As he was led from court after sentencing in that case, he tried to escape by jumping into an elevator. He was recaptured and sent to the Missouri state penitentiary, where he made two more escape attempts. For a time, he was confined to the maximum security ward at the state hospital in Fulton, Mo. But he was eventually returned to the penitentiary, from which he escaped in 1967. He remained a fugitive until arrested in London in the King assassination.

A Barefoot Boy In Soiled, Ragged Clothes

James Earl Ray, the oldest of nine children, was born on March 10, 1928, in a furnished room in a red-light district in Alton, Ill. His father was James Ray, who, when he worked at all, which was rarely, tried his hand at farming and trucking. James Earl's mother, the former Lucie Maher, was a woman of very limited intelligence, barely able to communicate.

In "The Life of James Earl Ray," (Little, Brown, 1976), George McMillan reported that on the day that James Earl Ray was born, his uncle went to prison and the two men who had witnessed his parents' wedding were arrested for a holdup. His father had also been a convict, and his great-grandfather was probably Ned Ray, a Western bad man hanged in Bannack, Mont.

The Ray family was living on a run-down farm outside, Ewing, Mo. — a town without a water system, a sewage system, paved streets or a doctor — when James Earl entered school at the age of 7. He was barefoot, dressed in ragged pants and a man's soiled coat. On his report card, in the space that asked for "attitude toward regulations," a teacher once wrote, "Violates all of them." His I.Q. was later measured at 108, slightly above average. Even as a child, he had a fierce temper.

He dropped out of school in the 10th grade and began to drift. He found work for a while at the International Shoe Company in Hartford, Ill., but was laid off at the end of 1945 and joined the Army.

After two years of service in the infantry and the military police, mostly in Germany, he received a less-than-honorable general discharge in December 1948 for "ineptness and lack of adaptability to military service." He had served three months at hard labor for drunkenness and resisting arrest.

He worked for a time in Chicago but lost his job, then headed west to Los Angeles, where his life in crime began.

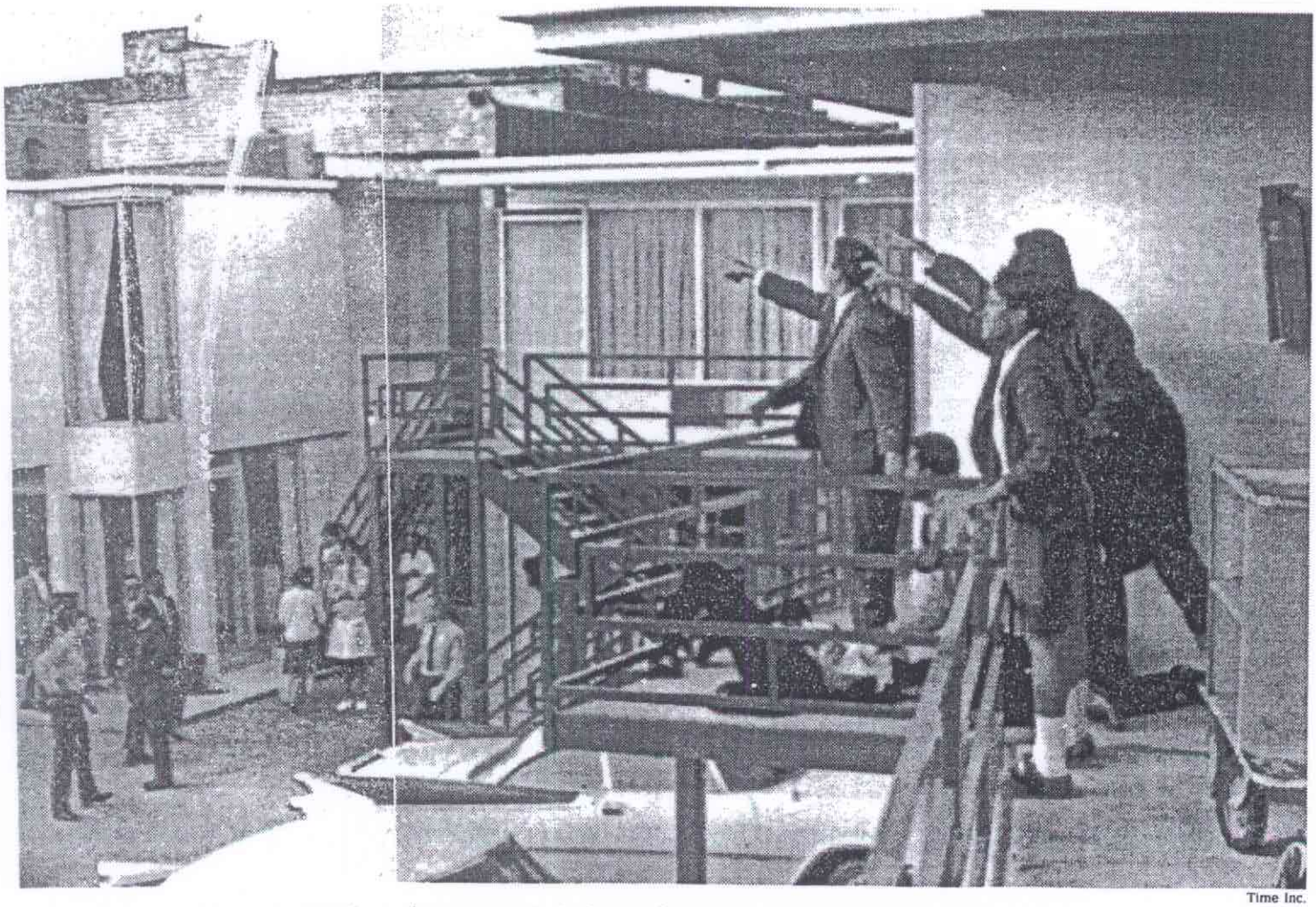
Mr. Ray is survived by six of his siblings: John, of St. Louis; Jerry, of Smartt, Tenn.; Carol Pepper (not related to James Earl Ray's lawyer), who lives near St. Louis, and Max, Suzan and Melba, whose hometowns are unknown.

Mr. Ray's brother Jerry once described him as an admirer of Hitler, saying "he would make the U.S. an all-white country, no Jews or Negroes." And Mr. Ray's prison friends said that when Dr. King became a national figure, his image on television was enough to send Mr. Ray into a rage.

"Somebody's got to get him," he was quoted as saying. "If I ever get to the streets, I am going to kill him."

Associated Press

In March 1997, one of Dr. King's sons, Dexter Scott King, visited Mr. Ray in Nashville and told him that the King family believed in his innocence.



Time Inc.

Minutes after the King assassination, witnesses on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis pointed toward a rooming house from which the shot had been fired. It would be two months before the assassin, James Earl Ray, was taken into custody, in London.

Associated Press

James Earl Ray, handcuffed to a leather belt and wearing a bulletproof vest, being escorted to his Memphis jail by the Shelby County sheriff in July 1968.