

Ray's Guilty Plea Called Life Maneuver

WASHINGTON (UPI) — Famed trial lawyer Percy Foreman testified today he convinced James Earl Ray to plead guilty to the murder of Martin Luther King Jr., telling him "there is a little more than a 99 percent chance of your receiving a death penalty" if the case went to trial.

Foreman told the House Assassinations Committee he wrote Ray Feb. 13, 1969 — seven months after Ray was caught in London and returned to Memphis — that "if I am able to save your life by negotiation with the attorney general and the court, I will consider it one of the great accomplishments of my career in the courtroom."

Foreman had handled some 1,000 murder cases up to that time and only one of the defendants he represented was executed.

He testified today as the committee tried to learn how Ray, a small-time crook without apparent funds, so expertly escaped to Europe after the King murder.

Foreman said he wrote Ray there was "a 100 percent chance of a guilty verdict" if the case went to trial and "a little more than a 99 percent chance of your receiving a death penalty."

Ray, agreed to plead guilty March 10, 1969, to a lesser charge of manslaughter and was sentenced to a 99-years at Brushy Mountain State Prison in Tennessee.

Within days of his plea, however, Ray changed his mind, said he had been poorly advised and fired Foreman. Ray has since retained eight other lawyers in attempts to prove his claim of innocence in the April 4, 1968, King murder.

Chief Counsel G. Robert Blakely called Foreman as a

witness after staff investigators traced Ray's movements following the Memphis murder to Canada, England, Portugal and back to England where he was arrested in London while preparing to board an airliner for Brussels.

Investigators were unable to trace any underworld contacts Ray may have had in Canada in securing four separate aliases — all of living Canadians who resembled Ray — and two Canadian passports.

Similarly, Scotland Yard detectives said Ray had no close associates in England and received no financial help from anyone there.

Blakely told the committee Friday that many people wonder how Ray initially escaped capture in the King death.

"It has been rightly noted . . . that in other criminal undertakings Ray was markedly inept while in the assassination and flight that followed he showed cunning and resourcefulness," Blakely said.

Furthermore, he said, Ray may have committed armed robberies but his record "hardly shows a tendency toward personal violence," Blakely added. "Armed robbery is not contract murder."

Another question is the source of Ray's extensive travel funds.

Blakely said Ray is conservatively estimated to have spent \$9,000 in the 14 months after escaping from the Missouri State Penitentiary, although he is thought to have started with little cash and only worked six weeks.

Ray was able to acquire documentation for two aliases, using the names of living Toronto residents who "shared noticeable physical similarities" to Ray, Blakely said.