

Books of The Times

# The Banality of Evil (Cont'd.)

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

**AN AMERICAN DEATH.** *The True Story of the Assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Greatest Manhunt of Our Time.* By Gerold Frank. 467 pages. Illustrated. Doubleday. \$10.

Frankly—and perhaps unfairly—it struck me at first as implausible that Gerold Frank should be the one to dispel the lingering mysteries surrounding Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. To judge from his previous record at least, Mr. Frank seemed even less qualified to explain one of the most disturbing tragedies of our times than William Manchester, who tried and failed to write the definitive story of John F. Kennedy's death.

Although Mr. Frank had always been respected as an able reporter and interviewer, his taste in subject matter has tended toward the sensational and sordid—to confessions by unhappy Hollywood actresses and accounts of exotic crimes. Bluntly, one did not expect



Phillips Halsman  
Gerold Frank

the case of Dr. King to be laid to rest by the father-confessor of Zsa Zsa Gabor and the biographer of the Boston Strangler.

Yet Mr. Frank's reconstruction of Dr. King's murder and its aftermath is remarkably convincing and reassuring (that is, to those of us who would prefer to believe that no conspiracy was involved). Perhaps it is just that we have grown numb to such disasters and tired of suspecting conspiracies behind them, but Mr. Frank's book seems to clear up most of the major puzzles.

### Some Troubling Questions

Who exactly was James Earl Ray, the convicted assassin? How did he escape from the Missouri State Penitentiary in Jefferson City on April 24, 1967? What did he do between the time of his escape and the day of Dr. King's shooting in April of the following year? What mysterious figures was Ray in touch with both before and after the shooting? And why did he suddenly seem to have more money to live on than ever in his life before? These were only some of the more obvious questions that troubled us at a time when the idea of still another lone psychopath striking out at yet another great American leader

seemed too coincidental to believe.

More specifically: How, if Ray had acted alone, was he able to assume the aliases of three actual Canadian citizens who bore remarkable resemblances to him? How to explain the mysterious and perhaps damagingly misleading radio broadcast describing a chase after an alternate getaway car during the hours following Dr. King's death? What about all the eyewitness descriptions of possible assassins other than Ray? And what was the meaning of Ray's rising in court to challenge the very fabric of his guilty plea? Such questions as these added fuel to an already raging fire.

And more important: If there was no conspiracy behind the act, why did James Earl Ray suddenly change from a "penny-ante" holdup man to a jackal-like assassin stalking a political figure from whose death he would not profit? And why did the team of Memphis prosecutors accept the "deal" of Ray's guilty plea in exchange for a 99-year prison sentence, when they must have known that American public opinion would be frustrated and outraged, and the reputation of Memphis justice tarnished?

To some of these and similar questions, Mr. Frank offers specific answers. Ray did not, after all, spend much money during his flight to Canada and Europe: Except when he was en route in trans-Atlantic jets, he lay around in cheap rooming houses. The mysterious radio broadcast proved to be a disturbed teen-ager's hoax. The eyewitness reports describing other fleeing gunmen invariably broke down under closer questioning (as in all major disasters, paranoia struck deep). And it is simply routine practice for criminals to exploit for passport purposes the identities of actual people who resemble them.

To other questions, Mr. Frank offers a welter of plausible if unsensational detail. Yes, Ray made many contacts before and after the event; he was, after all, an experienced criminal. But his comings and goings—his visits, phone calls and exchanges of letters—hardly suggest a conspiracy afoot, at least not when one learns of the bar-girls whom he befriended, the hippies he traveled with, the psychologist he consulted to build up his self-confidence, and the locksmithing, dancing and bartending lessons he enrolled in to improve his prospects.

### Convincing Explanations

As for the larger questions: Mr. Frank constructs detailed and convincing explana-

tions. The Memphis prosecuting team was fully aware of the bad impression the "deal" would make. But it weighed the alternative carefully and concluded that a full-dress trial might have far more disastrous results, if only because of the possibility of a single juror's causing a mistrial. Besides, Tennessee law required that Ray's guilty plea be accepted, and the absence of a state statute of limitations to first-degree murder meant that the case could always be reopened, if evidence of a conspiracy were to come to light.

As for Ray himself: There was more to him than met the eye. He was shrewder than he appeared; more antiblack than he ever let on; more white-supremacist than he generally allowed. He wanted headlines, a big kill, a place in history at whatever the cost. While such speculations have been raised before, Mr. Frank's detailed account lends them new plausibility.

Not every question is satisfactorily answered by "An American Death." Some of Mr. Frank's most plausible explanations are undermined by his reluctance to describe his exact sources. Those readers who still strongly prefer to believe in a conspiracy will doubtless find grounds to do so. But on the whole, "An American Death" makes excellent good sense. If only because its workmanlike reportage fills the vacuum where fantasy has up until now had freedom to play, it should end at least some of our worries.