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CIA Linked To Mexico Jail Escape

Reuters

Mexico City

A Mexican lawyer claimed yesterday that the CIA engineered the helicopter escape from jail here of a convicted American murderer.

Joel Kaplan of New York made the dramatic escape from jail Wednesday night.

Victor Velazquez, Kaplan's lawyer during his 1961 murder trial, said "Kaplan was without doubt a member of the Central Intelligence Agency, and only the CIA could have freed him. 'The whole episode is the result of an international political intrigue.'"

Kaplan, 41, was serving a 30-year sentence for murder when he and Venezuelan Antonio Castro Contreras were lifted to freedom by helicopter from the yard of the Santa Maria Acatitla prison here Wednesday night.

The helicopter, painted in the blue-and-white colors of the Mexican attorney general's office, landed in the yard under the eyes of four guards in watchtowers just after evening fall call.

Kaplan and Castro Contreras, clearly waiting for its arrival, immediately leaped aboard.

The rest of the more than 100 guards

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were in the prison theater watching a detective movie when the escape took place. City police were alerted about 30 minutes later by the prison governor. Both the governor and the guards are under intensive questioning.

JAIL

Some police sources said that the helicopter was known to have flown from the jail in the south of the city to a tiny airport at Venta Prieta, a village near the town of Pachuca 100 miles north of here. There a light plane was waiting to carry the two escapees out of the country, these sources said.

U. S. police reportedly have been asked to cooperate in the search for the two men and the pilot of the helicopter.

Kaplan's wife, Irma, a Mexican whom he married while in jail, told police she knew nothing of her husband's escape. She visited him Wednesday afternoon along with a man named Harvey Orville Dale, said to be a friend of the couple.

Police named Dale as the pilot of the helicopter, following the discovery in the cell Kaplan and Castro Contreras shared of a letter mentioning him. He was registered in a hotel near Mexico City airport until August 15 but now has disappeared.

Castro Contreras was serving a nine-year sentence for fraud and is said by police to be an experienced pilot.

LAYER

Velazquez was Kaplan's attorney during his 1961 murder trial here. Kaplan was charged with murder after the discovery of a body said to be that of a Puerto Rican-born U.S. businessman, Luis Melchoir Vidal, beside a road south of Mexico City.

Velazquez said that Vidal in fact, was not dead, Kaplan was found guilty.

For years there has been speculation about the mysterious events surrounding the Kaplan-Vidal affair, which has been variously linked with international arms smuggling, drug trafficking and efforts to overthrow the Fidel Castro government in Cuba and the late president Anastasio Somoza of Nicaragua.

Kaplan was arrested by Interpol in Spain in 1961 after Vidal's wife Teresa identified a body found near here as that of her husband. But Velazquez and Kaplan contended that the corpse bore no resemblance to the businessman.

CLAIM

The lawyer has consistently claimed that Vidal left Mexico for Guatemala and from there made his way to Cuba. One newspaper here said yesterday that Mrs. Vidal and her three children had disappeared from their New York Home about the same time and have not been heard of since.

According to Velazquez, Vidal had been involved in a deal to provide arms to anti-rightist and anti-Communist revolutionaries who formed units known as "the Caribbean Legion" aimed at overthrowing "dictatorships" in the area.

Because of CIA intervention, the deal fell through, according to Velazquez, and Vidal, who had already been paid for the weapons, arranged his own disappearance.

"Kaplan, who probably prevented the sale of the arms and who was watching to see that it was not carried out some other way, was framed for Vidal's 'death,'" the lawyer added.