

Townley Relates Fears for Safety

1/26/79

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Michael V. Townley, the confessed assassin of former Chilean ambassador Orlando Letelier, has portrayed himself as the ultimate Chilean DINA secret police agent. Nonetheless, he testified yesterday that last year he feared for his own life at the hand of DINA superiors.

Townley, ending six days of testimony at the federal court trial here of three Cuban exiles charged in connection with Letelier's 1976 Embassy Row killing, said his former DINA boss, Juan Manuel Contreras Sepulveda, suggested that he go to "the south of Chile" as the Letelier investigation intensified.

But the American-born Townley, in apparently one of the few DINA directives he failed to obey, said that he did not go because "I was worried for my safety."

Contreras suggested that as part of the 1978 cover-up of the Chilean involvement in the Letelier bombing assassination that Townley go to an area of Chile that Contreras "controlled," Townley testified earlier in the trial.

But yesterday the 36-year-old Townley said he feared for his safety because "I felt at that time the easiest way to comply with the cover-up would be by my disappearance."

He said Contreras and former DINA agent Armando Fernandez Larios, who are both awaiting a Chilean Supreme Court decision on whether they will be extradited to the U.S. to stand trial in the Letelier case, and a Contreras aide were the only ones who knew of the cover-up.

Townley apparently stayed in the Santiago area

before eventually being turned over by Chile to the FBI. Townley, the government's key witness in the trial of the Cubans, has in his testimony extensively implicated his one-time DINA colleagues in the Letelier killing.

On Wednesday, Townley had testified that he gave what he described as an "incorrect answer" to a question put to him in August by U.S. District Court Judge Barrington D. Parker when Townley pleaded guilty to conspiring to murder a foreign official.

Yesterday, Assistant U.S. Attorney Eugene M. Propper said defense attorney Lawrence Dubin had "misstated the plea transcript" when he asked Townley a question that led to his admission that he had made an "incorrect answer." The question involved Townley telling Parker he had no experience before the Sept. 21, 1976, Letelier killing with the use of radio-controlled bombs such as that used in the assassination.

Propper noted that the August transcript shows that Townley told Parker he had experience with explosives in general, but not "with this particular device," meaning the bomb that killed Letelier.

While Assistant U.S. Attorney E. Lawrence Barcella Jr. argued in a bench conference that Dubin was "playing fast and loose with the jury," the judge eventually submitted both transcripts into the record and told the jury he did not think either defense or prosecution lawyers were guilty of "any improper conduct."

The trial of the three Cubans—Guillermo Novo Sampol; his brother Ignacio Novo Sampol, and Alvin Ross Diaz—resumes Monday.