

James Earl Ray: A Decade in the Public Mind

By WOLFGANG SAXON

From the time of the assassination of the Dr. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. 10 years ago until this month, when the way was cleared for him to "go public" on Capitol Hill, James Earl Ray never allowed the public to put him out of mind for long.

Instead, Mr. Ray continually made news with denials of his guilt, with his role as a figure in conspiracy scenarios and with a spectacular jail break just over a year ago from Brushy Mountain State Prison, where he is serving a 99-term.

Over the years, Mr. Ray, now 50 years old, went through a succession of 11 lawyers, gave closed testimony to investigators of the House of Representatives and vainly pursued a quest for a new trial that, he insisted, would clear him of the accusation that he shot the civil rights leader in Memphis on April 4, 1968.

Twelve days ago, a Federal judge in Washington signed papers that would make it possible for Mr. Ray to be brought before the special House assassination committee. Members of the committee had previously questioned him behind closed doors in the Tennessee prison.

His most recent attorney, Mark Lane, said at the time that his client wanted to "go public" with his story. No immediate date for his committee appearance was set.

Mr. Lane, a New York lawyer, is the author of a book on the King assassination. Mr. Ray engaged him last October while involved in preliminary proceedings before a Criminal Court judge in Tennessee in connection with his trial on charges stemming from his escape from the state prison.

Mr. Ray told the judge that he wanted Jack Kershaw of Nashville, his previous lawyers, relieved because he had become "deeply involved in conflict of interest." The basis for this assertion was an interview that Mr. Kershaw had given to Playboy magazine.

The interview included results of polygraph tests purporting to show that Mr. Ray lied when he denied killing Dr. King as the civil rights leader stood on the balcony of a Memphis motel. Mr. Ray was accused of shooting Dr. King, acting alone, from a window of a nearby rooming house.

Mr. Ray was apprehended in London on June 8, 1968, two months after the assassination. In that time, he led the authorities on a 25,000-mile chase through three countries.

Among fellow prisoners, Mr. Ray had always been known as an escape artist, constantly plotting ways to get out. He succeeded in 1967 by slipping out of the Missouri State Penitentiary at Jefferson City. Prison offi-

cial never figured out how he managed it.

Then, on the night of June 10, 1977, he and five other inmates bolted over the wall of the maximum-security prison in Tennessee, executing an ingenious escape plot attributed to Mr. Ray. All of those who escaped were recaptured within days; Mr. Ray was seized a few miles from the prison after 54 hours.

The State of Tennessee then wanted the Federal Government to take charge of Mr. Ray, but his attorney contended that Mr. Ray would be in "grave danger" from those who want to keep secret the details of the King assassination if he were transferred to a Federal institution.

Mr. Ray, along with the others who escaped, was put in solitary confinement at Brushy Mountain until January.

Also in January, the Federal Bureau of Investigation made public its conclusion that Mr. Ray had financed himself through a series of robberies in the two months as a fugitive after the King assassination. The F.B.I. files disputed assertions that he had been financially supported by co-conspirators.

The documents disclosed that Mr. Ray was preparing for a flight to South Africa just before he was seized at London's Heathrow Airport in 1968.