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CIA Link to Rescue Denied

By John Burks

Joel David Kaplan, the 41 year old ex-New Yorker whose helicopter escape from a Mexico City prison last week was one of the most daring in that nation's history, was not involved with the Central Intelligence Agency at the time of his escape, according to San Francisco attorney Melvin Belli.

A law partner of Belli's,

Vasilios Choulos, has spoken with the sister of the missing man and reports that Kaplan is "safe and sound and within this country."

Kaplan, says attorney Choulos, "is afraid to surface because he's been told that if he ever escaped and surfaced he'd be a dead man in 24 hours."

For the time being, the only means of contacting Kaplan is through Choulos, via Judith Kaplan Dowis, whose whereabouts Choulos will not tell for safety's sake. Neither Choulos nor Belli claim to know where Kaplan himself is.

Belli, who has represented the Kaplan family for some years, said yesterday the CIA was mixed up with the 1961 murder of Luis Mel-

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chior Vidal, a Puerto Rican born U.S. businessman, which resulted in Kaplan's conviction and sentencing to 28 years in the Mexico City prison.

"But not now," said Belli. "Kaplan was completely cut loose by the CIA when he was racked up on that homicide charge down there."

This might indicate that the CIA had no hand in the dramatic escape, despite earlier speculation centering on a "CIA rescue mission." When contacted in Washington, a CIA spokesman said he knew no more about the case than he'd read in the papers and "we never comment on any published reports."

A helicopter painted in official colors landed in the prison courtyard Wednesday evening, and Kaplan and his cellmate, Antonio Contreras, a Venezuelan, dashed to board it. They were aloft and headed toward the Texas border before prison guards could react. It looked like a segment from the Mission Impossible TV show.

At Brownsville, Texas, Contreras was reportedly placed aboard a small airplane headed for Guatemala, and mystery escapee Kaplan reportedly boarded another small airplane — a Cessna single-engine 210 — bound for Sausalito.

Though the FBI — and a passle of newsmen — have been trying to track down Kaplan in or around Sausalito, his whereabouts remain unknown.

Attorney Choulos says "this idea that Choulos might be in Sausalito just isn't factual." He strenuously questions any FBI participation in a man hunt for his client,

"because Kaplan has broken no American or Mexican law." Jailbreak is no crime in Mexico, and neither, Choulos says, is it illegal for an American citizen to re-enter the country.

Nonetheless, Mexican officials yesterday announced the arrest of three Mexican nationals for their alleged roles in the escape.

There was talk in Sausalito of a similar plan to spring Kaplan from the Mexican prison two years ago. This evidently involved limousines, airplanes, hand grenades, machine guns and high level dope dealers — but no helicopter. So far as is known, the earlier escape plan was never set in action.

Choulos says he heard rumors of such a scheme a couple of years ago "but I knew there was nothing to it." Choulos says speculation regarding an escape ran high because Kaplan's sister, Judith Kaplan Dowis, was then living in Sausalito and working through high-power legal advisors to get her brother pardoned. She recently moved to New Mexico, according to Choulos.

The Kaplan family is monitored and it has been linked with the CIA via the J. M. Kaplan Fund, chartered in Delaware, with New York offices. J. M. Kaplan, the fund's founder, is Joel David Kaplan's great-uncle.

In 1967, Rep. C. Wright Patman of the House tax subcommittee identified the Kaplan Fund as a "financial cover for the disbursement of CIA funds." And Joel David Kaplan's Mexican attorney, Victor Velazquez, told newsmen after his client's escape that Kaplan was a "well known" CIA agent who made no attempt to hide it.