

By Robert A. Jones  
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### Nashville, Tenn.

He is thinner now than he was, pale from long months of isolation in his cell, and though James Earl Ray is only 45 years old he seems an old man.

The convicted assassin of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stares suspiciously at visitors to his cell, talks to almost no one, refuses to exercise or work and spends his days planning the next legal bout with Tennessee officials.

For the most part, the legal challenges that Ray writes on a small typewriter in his cell are filed in a district court office, almost invariably denied and soon forgotten. But that may be changing.

It began late last month when a local television station here reported that Ray, in a plea for a new trial, was about to release to Tennessee authorities the names of several persons who plotted in Dr. King's murder. Rumors of the details spread quickly; one report alleged that Ray would involve himself with a group of prominent white Southerners who hired him to perform the 1968 rifle slaying in Memphis.

As it turned out, both the original report and the rumors were incorrect, but what Ray did claim in a complaint filed with the federal district court here was

enough to keep alive speculation that a conspiracy may have led to Dr. King's death.

Ray, who confessed to the King murder in 1968 and received a 99-year sentence, asked for \$500,000 damages from Tennessee as a result of "oppressive confinement" and complicity in the suppression of evidence during his trial.

Contrary to the earlier reports, Ray did not name any individuals nor did he directly allege a conspiracy. He did say however, that "various items of information" had been suppressed by his former attorney, Percy Foreman. The information included two phone numbers which, Ray claimed, turned out to belong to persons or

groups with reasons to hate Dr. King.

The two phone numbers, one in Baton Rouge and the other in New Orleans, were tracked down, Ray said, by the late Z. T. Osborn, a disbarred Nashville attorney who was furnished the numbers "indirectly."

In his petition to U.S. District Court Judge L. Clure Morton, Ray claimed that Osborn found the Baton Rouge number to be listed to a parish (county) official "under the influence of a teamster"; the New Orleans number belonged to a "resident" who "was — among other things — an agent of a Mideast organization distressed because of Dr. Martin Luther King's reported forthcoming, before his death, public support of the Palestine Arab cause."

The "conspiracy" account stopped there. It amounted to less than a page of a 15-page petition which concerned itself mostly with conditions of Ray's isolated cell. The document not only failed to name the individuals involved, it did not list the critical phone number nor did it indicate what, if anything, the men involved had to do with the King murder.

But Ray did list those who, he said, knew of the investigation and suppressed the results. They were Foreman, his defense attorney during the Memphis trial; Tennessee Attorney General David Pack, along with one of his assistants, and, possibly, author William Bradford Huie, who worked extensively with both Ray and Foreman in a 1968 account of the assassination.

All of these figures denied any knowledge of the Louisiana phone numbers, variously branding Ray as "stir crazy," and his story "malarkey."

"I once spent 4½ days with Ray trying to establish that there was (a conspiracy)," said Foreman in a telephone interview. "I was trying to find somebody else. Anybody, anywhere. I was trying, you understand, to show him that it would be in his interest, if only to muddy the water."

there was no conspiracy, Foreman said, and he gave up the attempt.

Z. T. Osborn, the person who Ray claimed was most directly involved in the investigation, committed suicide in 1970. But others, including Osborn's widow, Foreman and Tennessee officials, have all claimed the late attorney had no connection with Ray or any investigation surrounding the case.

Ray's charges, hinting at involvement by both Jewish groups and the Teamsters Union, also failed to make the connection with his own previous account of the murder as told to William Bradford Huie in his book "He Slew the Dreamer."

In that version Ray claimed that a South American named "Raoul" instructed him to buy the 30-06 caliber rifle that was used to kill Dr. King on April 4, 1968. Told by Raoul to carry the gun to Memphis where it would be shown to prospective buyers, Ray claimed he was sitting in a white Mustang when he heard the shot. Moments later, Raoul assertedly ran to the car carrying the rifle.

Besides the South American, no other persons were ever mentioned in that account. However, Ray did tell Huie that several days before the shooting Raoul "said that he had to go to New Orleans for a couple of days and left."

Raoul is not mentioned in Ray's recent court petition.

In fact, there has been speculation here that these new suggestions of conspiracy may not be intended so much to gain a new trial for Ray but merely to foil attempts by Tennessee authorities to have him transferred to a federal prison, a place Ray does not want to go.

Tennessee state prison warden James H. Rose said the transfer is intended for Ray's benefit since a federal prison would allow him more freedom than the isolated cell to which he is presently confined.

Ray told one local reporter that the transfer was to place him in a federal "mental institution . . . where they can more or less keep a prisoner incommunicado." If Ray can create enough interest in a possible conspiracy to begin a new investigation, the specula-



Ray today: The appeals continue

tion goes, he may prevent his transfer because of the need to keep him within the state for further questioning.

Such an investigation seems unlikely. Talking with a local news reporter, Ray conceded that he had been the source of the original reports claiming he would name conspirators and that the information was a hoax.

"I sometime write misleading things on purpose," he told the Nashville Tennessean, purporting that the information, included in a letter, had been written to tease prison officials who, Ray believes, opened his mail surreptitiously.



**LAWYER FOREMAN**  
**He finally gave up**



**AUTHOR HUIE**  
**He denied the charge**



**Ray being taken to prison after his 1969 conviction**