

Report from Rome by Umberto Pascali

The politics of the Antonov release

How convenient to the Bulgarians and the KGB, that "businessman" Bekir Celenk never made it to the witness stand.

The Italian court ruling of March 29, acquitting three Bulgarians and three Turks charged with masterminding the May 13, 1981 assassination attempt against Pope John Paul II, has stalled allegations that convicted papal assailant, Mehemet Ali Agca, was the frontman in a larger, East bloc conspiracy to kill the first Polish Pope.

Ilario Martella, the judge who first suggested the link, said on Italian TV: "There is evidence, but it is not sufficient to condemn the accused Bulgarians and Turks. . . . In the case of the thesis of the plot, it has to be considered that those who organized it fashioned such a plan that it would be very difficult to identify them now."

Agca had testified that the conspiracy was hatched in the Bulgarian capital of Sofia, that a Soviet diplomat offered \$1.2 million for the shooting; and that it was to be carried out with help from Bulgarian agents. Judge Martella always stressed he had evidence of the link without Agca's testimony.

Under Italian law, two kinds of acquittal are possible: 1) acquittal simply for lack of evidence; and 2) a not-guilty verdict by reason of evidence. The verdict in this case was of the first type.

Four days after the ruling, the only Bulgarian arrested in Italy, Sergei Ivanov Antonov, the former manager of Balkan Air in Rome, got his passport from Italian authorities and left for Sofia. The immediate granting of the passport to Antonov is considered a "political" decision due to pressures

from Sofia and Moscow.

Antonov's detention was a very sensitive issue for the political heirs of Yuri Andropov, the KGB chief, who later became Soviet party leader and President.

The two Turks, Musa Sedar Celebi and Omer Bagci, will not get their passports. Celebi is the former European leader of the Grey Wolves, the fascist Turkish group that is now threatening demonstrations all over Europe and a march of 10,000 people on St. Peter's Square on April 13.

The press is already raising a stink over Antonov's escape, since the verdict will be appealed within a month. Moreover, another inquiry was opened months ago by three magistrates, Imposimato, Priore, and Martella.

Public prosecutor Antonio Marini, who handled the state's case in the nearly 10-month long trial, said, "The sentences confirmed the fear that Agca's behavior would have an impact on the civilian jurors." He asked for prison terms for the three Turks accused in the plot, having earlier recommended that the three Bulgarians be released under a provision in Italian law that does not amount to a complete finding of innocence.

One reason for the "lack of sufficient proof" was the lying of the Bulgarian government on the key question of Bekir Celenk, the Turk mafia boss who, according to Agca, had organized the whole plot in conjunction with Bulgarian secret services out of his suite in Sophia's Vitosha Hotel. Italian Judge Carlo Palermo had is-

sued, immediately after the attempt on the Pope, an arrest warrant against Celenk for international drugs and weapons smuggling.

Later another warrant was issued by the Rome attorney general, Antonio Albano, for complicity in the attempt against the Pope.

Celenk, known for leading his illegal traffics with the open complicity of Bulgarian authorities, was in West Germany in October 1982, when he learned that he was wanted in the case. He hopped on the first plane to Sofia. There, Bulgarian authorities rejected all charges against the "businessman" as they called him, and even organized a press conference where Celenk played the victim of a Western plot.

Prosecutor Marini complained forcefully during the hearings that the Bulgarian authorities did not let Celenk come to the trial. The Bulgarians claimed that they had Celenk under arrest or some not better specified form of detention. When Marini formally asked Sofia the reasons for the detention, Celenk was put on a plane to Turkey, where he was arrested for many pending crimes. He died three months afterward of a providential (for Sofia and Moscow) heart attack.

Three days after the end of the trial, the Bulgarian magistrate, Jordan Ormankov had the impudence to state to Italian TV news that "the request for Celenk's extradition never arrived in Bulgaria!"

In Moscow, the official news agency TASS proclaimed, "The West's reactionary quarters failed to take advantage of the case of the attempted murder of the Pope to further their sordid aims of smearing the Bulgarian nationals and thereby besmirching Socialist countries and of making a 'contribution' of their own to straining relations between East and West."