

## Trafficking Behind Bars...

Tijuana, Mexico—Mexican Federal Police supported by army troops put an end to an unusual narcotics conspiracy in the predawn hours of October 17 when they stormed the La Mesa State Penitentiary.

Inside the bars, they arrested three prisoners now well known to the press—Helen Calderon Hernandez, her husband Roberto, and his brother Juan.

In the quarters of Mrs. Hernandez, the authorities seized \$10,000 in U.S. currency and about \$100,000 worth

of jewelry. They also found records revealing that the ring, operating for almost four years within prison, had been grossing about \$3 million a month on the movement of heroin, cocaine, marihuana, amphetamines and other drugs into the United States.

The records documented the existence of a network of drug traffickers extending from cocaine producers in South America to narcotics dealers in Canada. They further confirmed connections with the French Corsican group in South America, headed by the now imprisoned Auguste Ricard, which moved tons of French heroin into the United States in the 1960's.

About a month after the raid on the La Mesa State Penitentiary, Mexican authorities arrested Patricia Evelyn Torres de Hernandez, wife of Juan, in a Tijuana motel as she was delivering a kilo of heroin to a U.S. customer. In her possession were found other family records documenting extensive real estate holdings and a balance in Hernandez accounts of about \$20 million in cash.

The Hernandez ring is no stranger to the Drug Enforcement Administration or Mexican authorities. For more than a decade it has been the target of state and local, as well as federal, agencies in Southern California. In 1968, Mrs. Hernandez, her husband Roberto, his brother Juan, and 48 others were indicted in San Diego after the seizure by San

Ysidro Customs officials of a million-dollar shipment of heroin and cocaine. A number of those charged pleaded guilty. But the Hernandezes fled to Mexico. They never stood trial in the United States.

In 1970, the Hernandez trio and seven others were arrested after investigators traced a 10-pound shipment of heroin to their hillside estate in Tijuana. Mexican police said they found in it an arsenal of illegal weapons, \$25,000 in cash, 31 uncashed money orders, and a heroin laboratory stocked with \$2.4 million worth of pure heroin. Convicted on narcotics charges in a Mexican Court, they have been serving 11-year sentences ever since.

The latest and, it is hoped, the last chapter of the long Hernandez case history has been in preparation for months at the DEA Regional Office in Los Angeles. On the basis of far-reaching intelligence as well as local undercover buys, DEA agents pieced together a detailed picture of transborder trafficking directed by the Hernandezes within the snug sanctuary of their prison cells. The evidence was turned over to Ramon Herrera Espanda, special assistant to Mexican Attorney General Pedro Ojeda-Pallada. Acting on orders from the top, Espanda permanently sealed off the penitentiary from other traffickers at large. But the case is not over yet. Reverberations from it will be heard for months to come.

—Joe Banters

Roberto and Helen Hernandez

