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Drama-Filled Life Dallas' Dark Day Another Highlight

By DON SLOAN, Staff Writer

It was a late autumn afternoon in 1963 when Ilya Mamantov's telephone rang.

"Mr. Mamantov? This is the Dallas Police Department. We need you to do the translation in an interrogation. Can you be ready in three minutes?"

Mamantov, somewhat flustered, muttered affirmation and walked outside where a police car, lights flashing and sirens screaming, was already in sight. It skidded to a stop.

"Get in, please," barked the driver. Mamantov, puzzled, got in and the squad car began bullying its way through heavy rush-hour traffic. At one intersection, as they sped through a red light, Mamantov saw his wife. He waved as she sat astonished.

Downtown, Mamantov, then a Russian instructor at the old Dallas College, was hustled out of the car and down a corridor at Police Headquarters. At one point he passed a thin, wiry young man in sweater and open-necked shirt, standing in a doorway flanked by police.

In another moment he sat down to question, through translation, that man's wife—Mrs. Lee Harvey Oswald. The day was Nov. 22, 1963, a day Dallas and the world will never forget.

Mamantov, now 52 years old and an assistant professor of Russian at Southern Methodist University, sat back in his chair Wednesday and continued.

"They brought in a rifle with a telescopic sight on it and told me to ask if it was her husband's. I did and she replied that it looked like one he had. She was very nervous.

"They questioned her closely for about an hour and a half, then told me I could go."

He was escorted back to the police car and driven home to explain as best he could to his dumbfounded wife his brush with some of America's most important and possibly most tragic history.

"I was Republican precinct chairman in North Dallas at the time and I'm sure they wondered if I

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had "anything" to do with it," he said, adjusting his glasses. "After all, Mr. Kennedy wasn't our candidate in 1960."

Ilya Mamantov is a medium height, medium built man with a rich accent sense of humor and impeccable manners.

When he reaches for a cigarette, he offers all around with a half-apologetic, "In Europe, it is the polite thing to do."

At SMU he heads a Russian program that has blossomed under his direction from a 14-student, one-year course in 1964 to a full four-year curriculum complete with branches into the English department.

HIS LIFE has spanned from the tiny Russian town where he was born, through German Nazi terrorism, a long stay in a displaced persons camp after World War II and jobs in New York and New Mexico, to his encounter with history here in Dallas and finally to his position at SMU.

Mamantov and his family were refugees for some time during the war and after it, so frightened of their future that at one time each carried a poison capsule in case of capture.

They spent several years in a DP camp in Germany following World War II and got out only by being sponsored by U.S. citizens.

MAMANTOV and his family came to the U.S. in 1949, lived a short time in New York, then moved to Roswell, N.M. He became a geologist for Sun Oil Co., continuing the profession he was forced to abandon in his home country of Latvia.

He moved to Dallas in 1955 and taught Russian part-time before heading the program at SMU in 1969. The program is perhaps his most consuming project and indeed one which he fervently believes is needed in Dallas.

"Russian culture has contributed significantly to world culture," he said, gesturing. "It's very important that people learn about it."

"Many associate Russia purely with communism and reject anything connected with it solely on that basis and that's not right."

This past year his Russian culture class, under the Department of Liberal Arts, commanded a higher student following than any other elective offered at the school.

MAMANTOV suggested the course with the idea that anyone who wished might enroll. It was a hit at SMU and this fall he plans to include even non-students and "anyone else who would be interested."

"We have built our program here on solid foundations," he said. "I am not afraid for any of my students to transfer to other colleges because we teach to represent the university."