

(Mount Clipping in Space Below)

The Stuff of Which Fanatics Are Made'

The author was Moscow Correspondent for NANA in 1959. A few years before, in 1953, she had been research assistant on Viet Nam for John F. Kennedy, then a senator. She is perhaps the only person to have been good friends with both the late President and his suspected assassin. She is today a free-lance writer on Soviet affairs.

By PRISCILLA JOHNSON

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CAMBRIDGE, Mass.—“For two years now I have been waiting to do this one thing. To dissolve my American citizenship and become a citizen of the Soviet Union.”

The time was November, 1959. The place was my room on the third floor of Moscow's Hotel Metropol. The speaker was Lee Harvey Oswald, prime suspect in the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

With his suit of charcoal gray flannel, dark tie and tan cashmere sweater, Lee looked, and sounded like Joe College with a slight southern drawl. But his life hadn't been that of a typical college boy.

His father, an insurance salesman, died before he was born. Raised in Texas and Louisiana, the boy spent two years in New York during his early teens. At 17, he enlisted in the U.S. Marines.

“I did it,” he said, “because we were poor and I didn't want to be a burden on my mother.” Later, he spent 14 months as a licensed radar operator in the Far East.

In September, 1959, his three-year hitch nearly done, the Marines gave Lee a dependency discharge. Just one month later, after an exhausting trip by land, sea and air, he arrived in Moscow to petition the Supreme Soviet, highest legislative body in the U.S.S.R., for Soviet citizenship.

Saw Fanatic

for days, Oswald had been

sitting alone in his hotel room, just one floor below mine at the Metropol. He had no friends in Russia and he didn't speak a word of the language. The only sightseeing he'd done was to “Detsky Mir,” a children's store one block from our hotel. He'd managed to buy an ice cream cone there, he told me proudly.

As we sat in my hotel room all evening and into the early hours of morning, he talked quietly about his plans to defect to Russia. However, I soon came to feel that this boy was of the stuff of which fanatics are made.

Even though Russian officials warned him Soviet citizenship is not easy to obtain, Lee was already referring to the Soviet

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Government as "my government." "But," said Lee, "Even if I am not accepted, on no account will I go back to the United States. I shall remain here, if necessary, as a resident alien."

All Soviet officials would promise at the time was that Lee could stay on in Russia whether or not he became a citizen. Meanwhile, they were "investigating the possibility of sending him to a Soviet higher technical institute."

At an age when angry young rebels all over the world find release in aping the beatniks, what brought this serious, soft-spoken southern boy to Moscow with no other ambition but to spend the rest of his life as a Soviet citizen? Evidently, it was a combination of poverty, the plight of the U. S. Negro, and the U. S. Marines.

"My mother," said Lee, "has been a worker all her life. She's a good example," he added, "of what happens to workers in the United States." He declined to elaborate.

"At the age of 15," he added, "after watching the way workers are treated in New York, and Negroes in the South, I was looking for a key to my environment. Then I discovered Socialist literature."

Lee was struck, in particular, by Marx's "Das Kapital." He concluded that, as an American, "I would become either a worker exploited for capitalist profit, or an exploiter or, since there are many in this category, I'd be one of the unemployed." Lee became a Marxist.

Later, as a Marine private in Japan and the Philippines,

he "had a chance to watch American militarist imperialism in action."

Year's Planning

Fully a year before, Lee began getting ready to go to Russia. Using a Berlitz grammar, he taught himself to read and write Russian. Never, said Lee, a nice-looking young man with gray eyes and brown hair, did he consider deserting the Marine Corps.

Did it occur to Lee that Soviet officials might be embarrassed by his efforts to become a citizen of their country at a moment when Russia was cultivating good relations with the United States?

Russian officials, he said, "don't encourage and don't discourage me." They warned, however, that neither Lee's wish, nor theirs, would determine whether his citizenship application was to be accepted. They said it depended on the "over-all political atmosphere at the moment." Meanwhile, they offered Lee the sanctuary of a prolonged stay in the U.S.S.R.

As for officials at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, they were torn between their desire to give Lee time to think it over, and their legal obligation to hear his oath renouncing American citizenship if he insisted.

Lee was bitter at U.S. Consul Richard Snyder, who, he charged, stalled him when he asked to take the oath on Oct. 31, the only time Lee had been at the Embassy. As a result, Lee wouldn't go back there. He would let the Soviet government handle legal details when, and if, he became a cit-

izen of the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, he handed over his passport to the American Embassy.

I asked Lee if the ordinary Russians he met expressed surprise at his desire to defect. "Well," he said, "they're very curious and they ask me why. But materialist Muscovites," he added, "understand when I speak of the idealistic reasons that brought me here. And they ask me many questions about conditions of workers in the United States."

'Never Go Back'

Regardless of any material

shortcomings in Moscow, Lee insisted he would never go back to the U.S.A. "Emigration," he said, "isn't easy. I don't recommend it to everyone. It means coming to a new country, always being the outsider, always having to adjust. But to me, my reasons are strong and good. I believe I'm doing right."

That was why Lee wouldn't answer the phone when his mother was calling from Ft. Worth, trying to plead with him to return home. He had refused to speak to any American correspondents. Just why

He answered when I knocked he wouldn't do anything deci-
at his door and why, a few sive without at least letting
hours later, he came to see me me know.
in my room, I never learned.

As our conversation drew
to a close—we ate nothing,
and had been sipping only tea
—I had a terrible feeling of
futility. Disillusion, I was
sure, awaited him.

As he was leaving I asked
him to come see me again. The
Russians, Oswald told me, had
warned that he mustn't talk to
Americans. But he promised,
before closing the door, that

Two days later I went to the
second floor "dezhurnaya"—
the woman who sits near the
elevator and hands out keys to
each room—and asked for Mr.
Oswald. Her hands flew up in
a know-nothing gesture. "He's
gone," she said.

I'd wondered what had hap-
pened to him since. Now I
know.