HARPER'S — APRIL, 1964 (P 46)

Oswald in Moscow

by

Priscilla Johnson

What a long, private interview revealed to one reporter about the troubled personality of President Kennedy's accused assassin.

On a frosty November evening four years ago, I sat in my Moscow hotel room while a twenty-year-old American explained in a soft Southern accent his desire to defect to Russia. With his pale, rather pleasant features and his dark flannel suit, the young man looked like any of a dozen college boys I had known back home. His name was Lee Harvey Oswald.

I had sought him out a few hours earlier on the advice of an American colleague in Moscow. A boy named Oswald was staying at my hotel, the Metropol, my friend remarked casually. He was angry at everything American and impatient to become a Soviet citizen. "He won't talk to any of us," my colleague added, suggesting that, as a woman, I might have better luck.

An American defector was always good copy for a reporter in Moscow, and I had knocked, rather timidly, at Oswald's room late that afternoon. After what I had been told, I fully expected to be turned away. Instead the young man who opened the door readily assented to an interview. He promised with a smile that he would be at my room at nine o'clock in the evening.

He came at nine and stayed until two or three in the morning. Throughout our conversation he sat in an armchair, sipping tea from a green ceramic mug. More tea bubbled softly on a tiny electric burner in the corner. Except for a small gesture of one hand or an occasional tightening of the voice, Oswald's manner was unemphatic. His words seemed chosen to rule out even a hint of emotion. Yet in the notes I made as we talked I find, years later, the repeated marginal reminder to myself, "He's bitter."

In spite of his conventional appearance, I found Oswald, from the outset, extraordinary. From experience I knew just how formidable the long trip from the United States to Moscow can be, even if the traveler has money and a command of the Russian language. Here was a boy of twenty who, with only the money he had been able to save in less than three years as a Marine Corps private, had come six thousand miles with no thought but to live out his life in a country he had never seen, whose language he knew only slightly, and whose people he knew not at all. It was, I thought, a remarkable act of courage or folly.

I was touched by something homemade about him: the way he had tried, as he told me, to teach himself Russian alone at night in his Marine Corps barracks, using a Berlitz grammar; and how he had been reading economics on his own ever since he had discovered Marx's *Das Kapital* at the age of fifteen. I saw him as a little lost boy and, as such boys often are, rather lonely and proud.

Finally, Oswald impressed me because he was the first and, as it turned out, the only "ideological" defector I met in Moscow. Of the two or three other American defectors I encountered, none claimed to be motivated by a belief in communism. All appeared to be fleeing some obvious personal difficulty, such as an unhappy marriage back home. "My decision is not an emotional one," Oswald insisted. He was acting, he maintained, solely out of an intellectual conviction that Marxism was the only just way of life. For this alone he was memorable. In the months, and years, that followed our conversation, I had thought of him often, hoping one day to write a profile of this highly unusual defector. I never wrote it, however, for I felt that the key to this curious boy had eluded me.

Dismally Lonely

I have suggested that nothing about Oswald was more striking than his burial of the emotional factor—a denial, almost, that he had any feelings at all. And yet, looking back, I have two conflicting recollections. One is that he was struggling to hide his feelings from himself. The other is of emotion that would not be hidden. It was the counterpoint between the two, I suppose, that gave me a sense that there were gaping chinks in his armor and that he was too frail, psychologically, for what he had set out to do.

Among the feelings Oswald could not conceal was anxiety as to whether Kremlin officials would grant his request for Soviet citizenship, and whether his funds would stretch until he could go to work or become a state-supported student at a Soviet technical institute. Another was anger, directed mainly, at the time, against officials of the U. S. Embassy in Moscow. These officials, Oswald felt, had stalled him when he tried to take an oath renouncing his American citizenship. Here the tension between his feelings and his effort to suppress them became articulate: "I can't be too hard on them. But they are acting in an illegal way."

He also felt strongly about his mother. About his childhood Oswald was reticent to the point of mystery. He would only say that he grew up first in Texas and Louisiana and had then gone for two years to New York City with his mother. He refused even to say what section of the city he had lived in. Of teachers, or of friends he had played with there, he said not a word. Only that, in New York, "I had a chance to watch the treatment of workers, the fact that they are exploited. I had been brought up, like any Southern boy, to hate Negroes." When, at fifteen, "I was looking for a key to my environment, I discovered socialist literature. I saw that the description it gave of capitalist conditions was quite correct. It opened my eyes to the economic reasons for hating Negroes: so that wages can be kept low. I became a Marxist." To me, it was as though Oswald wanted to convince us both that he had never had a childhood, that he had been all his life a machine, calibrating social justice.

About his father he was so evasive that I was nonplused. "My father," he told me, "died before I was born. I believe he was an insurance salesman." That was all. Not another word could I pry out of him.

He sounded quite different when it came to his mother. She was ill, Oswald told me, living in Fort Worth with his brother. "My mother has been a worker all her life," he went on, "having to produce profit for capitalists. She's a good example of what happens to workers in the United States." He refused to specify what work she had actually been doing. I asked whether his mother was disillusioned, like him, or worn-out beyond her years? "That's the usual end of people in the United States, isn't it?" he countered. Then came the denial of his own indignation. "It's the end of everyone, in any country. It's a question of why they end up that way. For whom and under what system they work." In spite of Oswald's effort to depersonalize, to blame his mother's suffering on Marxist "social processes," I felt that here was a bitterness too deep for tears. Shortly after this he remarked: "I cannot live in the United States, so I shall remain here, if necessary, as a resident alien." Earlier he had told me that even if Soviet officials refused to grant his application for citizenship, "I would not consider returning to the United States." Throughout the interview he referred to the Soviet government as "my government."

Since Oswald had traveled thousands of miles to build a new life in Russia, I expected that he would be wasting no time learning all he could about the country. He would be anxious, I as-

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sumed, to see how the socialist economic theories he believed in were working out in practice. That was where I had my biggest surprise. The life he was leading in Moscow was a dismally lonely one. Most of each day he spent sitting alone in his hotel room waiting for the telephone to ring. If he thought it was his mother calling from Fort Worth to beg him to come home, he wouldn't answer. Every time it rang, though, he hoped it was some Soviet official calling to announce that his request for citizenship had been granted.

Oswald seemed to feel helpless in the Russian language. "I was able to teach myself to read and write," he said. "But I still have trouble speaking." The only expedition he had taken on his own in nearly a month in Moscow had been a walk to Detsky Mir, a children's department store only two blocks from our hotel. He seemed proud that, in the scramble of Soviet shoppers, he had managed to elbow his way to the fourth floor buffet and buy himself an ice cream cone. He insisted that he had seen the "whole city of Moscow" and "the usual tourist attractions." But he would not name a single landmark he had actually visited. For all his struggle to get to Moscow and his efforts to stay, he appeared to lack even the curiosity of the ordinary American tourist.

Although Oswald claimed that he had visited Russians in their homes, his vagueness left me uncertain as to whether he had actually struck up a single unofficial friendship. He would only say: "Moscow is an impressive city because the energy put out by the government is all used toward peaceful and cultural purposes. People here are so well off and happy and have so much faith in the future of their country. Material poverty is not to be seen here." These generalizations and, above all, Oswald's own walled-in existence led me to conclude that he was strangely blind. Not only was he not looking at the life all around him. He was making an heroic effort not to see it.

I had a similar surprise when it came to his grasp of Marxist economics. For hours we discussed this; apart from his defection, it was the topic that seemed to interest him most. Worried about him now, I tried to warn him of the disappointment which I felt he might encounter once he came in contact with Soviet life as it really is. I argued that there are poverty and injustice in any country, including the Soviet Union, which is undergoing rapid industrialization. The worker has to be paid less than the value of what he has created if there is to be capital for new investment. Oswald agreed. To him, however, the social system for which this injustice is endured was the crucial thing. Soviet workers, like Americans, he observed, "are paid a wage. But the profit they produce is used to benefit *all* [here he gave one of his rare waves for emphasis] of the people. *They* have an economic system that is not based on credit and speculation." Somehow, after listening awhile, I concluded that his views were rigid and naïve, and that he did not know his Marxism very well.

In one sense, however, his outlook seemed to fit that of orthodox Marxism. Not once in all our hours of conversation did Oswald so much as mention a single political leader, not President Eisenhower, nor Fidel Castro, nor then Senator John F. Kennedy, nor Josef Stalin, nor Nikita Khrushchev, nor anybody else. If he saw individual statesmen as either heroes or villains, he certainly gave no sign. On the contrary. For him impersonal Marxist social categories—"exploitation of the worker," the "capitalist system of profits," "militarist imperialism"—were explanation enough of the world's ills.

Destroying an Abstraction

Since this brings us to the assassination, I am impressed by the terrible irony of that deed, if Oswald was, in fact, the assassin. For Marxism has traditionally rejected assassination as a weapon of political struggle. According to Marxist philosophy, those whom we call leaders only appear to lead. In reality it is they who are led by the historical forces around them. The latter, in turn, are determined by the economic modes of production. Thus, in the view of Lenin, assassination was at best irrelevant. I doubt that Oswald was aware that he was violating Lenin's writings on individual terror when—and if—he pulled the trigger last November 22. I suspect, rather, that he was not Marxist enough to realize that his was the ultimate anti-Marxist act.

I should like to make another observation that is outside my recollections. Oswald's defection to Soviet Russia could, as it happened, have been a dry run for the assassination, if he was—again—the assassin. For both actions he had to acquire a skill: in the one case, Russian, which he had learned imperfectly at the time I met him; in the other, marksmanship, which he evidently mastered much better. Both deeds took months to prepare. For the first he spent, as he told me, two years saving money, learning how to get cheaply to Russia, where to apply for a Soviet visa (Helsinki), and how to go about contacting the

proper Soviet officials once he arrived in Moscow. For the later deed he had to purchase a rifle inconspicuously, wait for Kennedy to visit Dallas and for a route to be announced, arrange to station himself along it without arousing suspicion, and so forth. Lee Oswald was a failure at nearly everything he tried. But two supremely difficult feats he did accomplish. I saw two qualities in him that could have been crucial to his success in each: single-mindedness and secretiveness.

"For the past two years," Oswald told me, raising his voice a little, "I have been waiting to do this one thing [defect to Russia]. For two years I was waiting to leave the Marine Corps." Throughout those two years, during which he had been saving money and learning the mechanics of defection, he had been so single-minded that he had even taken care to "form no emotional attachments" to girls, since such attachments might weaken his resolve.

Throughout those two years, moreover, he evidently concealed his intention to defect from all who were closest to him. No one at home suspected which way his ideas were tending even when, at the age of fifteen, he began reading Marxist literature. "My family and my friends in the Marines," he explained, "never knew my feelings about communism." Yet he had harbored those feelings for five years, and for the past year had been studying Russian at night in a Marine Corps barracks with inquisitive buddies all around him!

If Oswald was secretive about his personal life, refusing even to reveal to me how his mother earned a living, what section of New York City he had lived in, or how many brothers he had, he was equally evasive about the circumstances of his defection. He declined, for example, to say whether he had informed Intourist, the Soviet travel agency, of his intention to remain in Russia, how much he was paying for his room at the Metropol, who, if anyone, back in the United States had advised him on how to go about defecting, what Soviet government agencies he was dealing with in his request for citizenship, or even what books by American communist authors he had read. While discretion was no doubt appropriate in response to some of these questions, he was, I felt, making mountains of secrecy where other boys might have made a molehill. This tight-lipped, conspiratorial attitude that was already so pronounced when I met him could, however, have been invaluable during the long months preparing for the act of November 22.

To enter again into the realm of speculation, I should like to mention that from the moment he was arrested on November 22 it seemed to me unlikely that Oswald would confess to shooting the President. Unless, of course, his resistance were broken by extraordinary methods. If I understood him at all, I believe that refusal to cooperate with authority, expressed in a refusal to confess, would have been nearly as much a part of the social protest he was trying to make as the act of assassination itself. In my opinion, the two would have gone inseparably together.

Another of the ironies in which this case abounds has to do, it seems to me, with Oswald's attitude toward Kennedy as a man. I believe that Oswald may well have been less jealous of Kennedy's dazzling personal attributes—his wealth and good looks, his happy fortune in general—than many men to whom the idea of shooting the President never even occurred. Oswald was preoccupied with himself, not with other men. The good fortune of others, their riches and fine features, did not define him to himself as poor or ugly. Less than many men did Oswald strike me as "desiring this man's art and that man's scope." I believe that the John Kennedy he killed was not, to him, another human being who was richer and better endowed than he, but a surprisingly abstract being, a soulless personification of authority. (In a scornful aside about Marine Corps officers Oswald indicated to me his contempt for anyone in authority over him.) That Kennedy, perhaps more than any world leader of his time, happened also to wear authority with a gaiety and grace that might well have aroused the envy of others is probably beside the point in assessing the motives of Lee Harvey Oswald.

The Desire to Stand Out

No matter how steadfastly he might have resisted the efforts of his inquisitors to break him down, I believe that Oswald yearned to go down in history as the man who shot the President. Even if he would not and could not confess, he had, at least, to be caught. For if there was one thing that stood out in all our conversation, it was his truly compelling need—could it have been a response to some childhood humiliation?—to think of himself as extraordinary. A refusal to confess, expressed in stoic and triumphant silence, would have fitted this need. In some twisted way, it might also have enabled him to identify with other "unjustly" persecuted victims, such as Sacco and Vanzetti and the Rosenbergs.

While in one sense Oswald may have wanted to go down in history with a question mark over his guilt, surely in another sense he had to be marked for all time as the man who killed President Kennedy. Conflicting as these two needs—to be caught, yet not to confess—may appear, in reality they were part of a single compelling desire: the desire to stand out from other men.

To the trained psychiatric eye this desire must, I believe, have been written all over Lee Oswald. It became apparent to me, however, only after I had asked several questions arising from a suspicion I had that, for all his unassuming appearance, Oswald was merely another publicity seeker. How, I asked, did ordinary Russians view his defection? "The Russians I meet," he replied, "don't treat me as any celebrity." Somehow the way he said it made me feel that to himself, Lee Oswald really *was* a celebrity.

Later on, I asked Oswald if he would suggest defection as a way out for other young men who, like himself, might be dissatisfied with conditions back home? "I don't recommend defection for everyone," he warned.

It means, he went on, "coming to a new country, always being the outsider, always adjusting." Lesser men, he seemed to imply, might not be up to it. But he was.

As a means, however, of proving his "differentness," if that is what it was, defection seemed to have failed Lee Oswald. Back in Texas, people forgot all about him. Even among the Russians, he ceased after a while to stand out as a curiosity. To be marked as the extraordinary person he needed to be, he had to perform a yet more memorable, and outrageous, act.

That Oswald did, in fact, see himself as extraordinary came out unexpectedly when I asked him why he had been willing to grant me an interview at all. I expected a simple response. That he was homesick, maybe, and wanted someone to talk to. Instead, he surprised me. "I would like," he replied, "to give the people of the United States something to think about."

The Man from the Alaska Highway

by William Stafford

SOME rainy mornings before citizens get up
a foreigner in a white raincoat wanders
the schoolground, appearing and reappearing,
putting mushrooms in a plastic sack sopped with rain.
I watch through my dim window
wavy with water from the eaves.

He's a road builder. He told me once
the more a big freeway seems to wander in level
country the more planned it is: "A straight
road puts drivers to sleep. The knack is
to find the curve and lean the driver's
shoulder needs to find."

Geese came over last night.
Once he told me the Yukon bends millions
of dollars worth, even without any gold.
I looked at a map and saw that Alaska, the way
it happens along, can never—no matter what
anyone says—be just a state.

Today I went out at first light.
The road builder wasn't around, but I
leaned with my umbrella and saw
hundreds of mushrooms, almost hidden,
gleaming here and there,
nudging up through the playground.