

Three Witnesses

By Dick Russell

For more than two years, *New Times* has explored the mysteries surrounding the assassination of John F. Kennedy. At first, our articles pointed out the holes in the Warren Commission's theory that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in Dallas on November 22, 1963. After the House of Representatives voted—in the wake of Watergate and the exposure of FBI and CIA abuses—to investigate the assassination anew, we reported extensively on the Committee's progress. Now, of course, that investigation has been crippled by the forced resignation of Chief Counsel Richard Sprague (*New Times*, May 13).

What we present here is an intriguing series of tales surrounding the assassination. It is the story of three men: a baron, a gunrunner and a Cuban refugee. One was a close acquaintance of Lee Oswald; the others say they met him before the assassination. One killed himself the very day a House investigator planned to interview him; another will not let his name be used, because he fears for his life. All three talked at length to Dick Russell, the author of a forthcoming book on the Kennedy assassination. Taken alone, their stories are scenes from Raymond Chandler, snapshots of a once-incredible netherworld that has become increasingly familiar. As a whole, they may form the framework to the answer to what really happened in Dallas.

The Baron

Like Fitzgerald's Gatsby, Baron George Sergei de Mohrenschildt was borne back ceaselessly into the past. In



WIDE WORLD

"Of course, the truth of the assassination has not come out," Jeanna de Mohrenschildt said. "It will never come out. But we know it was a vast conspiracy." The Baron turned to face her. "Oswald," he said, "was a harmless lunatic"

June of 1976, a sultry day in Dallas, he had stood gazing out the picture window of his second-story apartment, talking casually about a young man who used to curl up on the couch with the Baron's Great Danes.

"No matter what they say, Lee Harvey Oswald was a delightful guy," de Mohrenschildt was saying. "They make a moron out of him, but he was smart as hell. Ahead of his time really, a kind of hippie of those days. In fact, he was the most honest man I knew. And I will tell you this—I am sure he did *not* shoot the president."

Nine months later, on March 29, one hour after an investigator for the

House Assassinations Committee left a calling-card with his daughter, the Baron apparently put a shotgun to his head in Palm Beach, Florida. In his absence came forward a Dutch journalist and longtime acquaintance, Willem Oltmans, with the sensational allegation that de Mohrenschildt had admitted serving as a middleman between Oswald and H.L. Hunt in an assassination plot involving other Texas oilmen, anti-Castro Cubans, and elements of the FBI and CIA.

But how credible was de Mohrenschildt? As an old friend in Dallas' Russian community, George Bouhe, once put it: "He's better equipped than anybody to talk. But we have an old Russian

proverb that will always apply to George de Mohrenschildt: 'The soul of the other person is in the darkness.'

Intrigue and oil were the two constants in the Baron's life. He was an emigrant son of the Czarist nobility who spoke five languages fluently and who, during the Second World War, was rumored to have spied for the French, Germans, Soviets and Latin Americans (the CIA's predecessor, the OSS, turned down his application). After the war, he went on to perform geological surveys for major U.S. oil companies all over South America, Europe and parts of Africa. He became acquainted with certain of Texas' more influential citizens—oilman John Mecom, construction magnates George and Herman Brown. In Mexico, he gained audience in 1960 with Soviet First Deputy Premier Anastas Mikoyan. In 1961 he was present in Guatemala City—by his account, on a "walking tour"—when the Bay of Pigs troops set out for Cuba.

Finally, when Lee and Marina Oswald returned to Texas from the Soviet Union in June 1962, the Baron soon became their closest friend. Why? Why would a member of the exclusive Dallas Petroleum Club take under his wing a Trotsky-talking sheet-metal worker some 30 years his junior?

The Warren Commission took 118 pages of his testimony to satisfy itself of de Mohrenschildt's benign intent, but among critics the question persisted: Was the Baron really "baby-sitting" Oswald for the CIA? While de Mohrenschildt told the commission he'd never served as any government's agent "in any respect whatsoever," a CIA file for the commission, declassified in 1976, admits having used him as a source. In the course of several meetings with a man from its Dallas office upon de Mohrenschildt's return from Yugoslavia late in 1957, "the CIA representative obtained foreign intelligence which was promptly disseminated to other federal agencies in ten separate reports." The Dallas official, according to the file, maintained "informal occasional contact" with the Baron until the fall of 1961.

The Warren Commission volumes, however, contain only passing reference in de Mohrenschildt's testimony to a government man named "G. Walter Moore." His true name was J. Walton Moore, and he had served the CIA in Dallas since its inception in 1947.

In two brief, cryptic interviews with me in the 18 months before his death, de Mohrenschildt claimed he would not have struck up his relationship with Oswald "if Jim Moore hadn't told

me Oswald was safe." The Baron wouldn't elaborate on that statement, except to hint that it constituted some kind of clearance.

J. Walton Moore is now a tall, white-haired man in his middle sixties, who continues to operate out of Dallas' small CIA office. Questioned at his home one summer evening in 1976 about de Mohrenschildt's remarks, he conceded knowing the Baron as a "pleasant sort of fellow" who provided "some decent information" after a trip to Yugoslavia. "To the best of my recollection, I hadn't seen de Mohrenschildt for a couple of years before the assassination," Moore added. "I don't know where George got the idea that I cleared Oswald for him. I never met Oswald. I never heard his name before the assassination."

For sure, the CIA did maintain an interest in de Mohrenschildt at least through April of 1963. That month, Oswald left Texas for New Orleans and de Mohrenschildt prepared to depart for a lucrative geological survey contract in Haiti. On April 29, according to a CIA Office of Security file, also declassified in 1976, "[Deleted] Case Officer had requested an expedite check of George DE MOHRENSCHILDT for reasons unknown to Security."

There is one alleged ex-CIA contract employee, now working for an oil company in Los Angeles, prepared to testify that de Mohrenschildt was the overseer of an aborted CIA plot to overthrow Haitian President Francois ("Papa Doc") Duvalier in June 1963. The existence of such a plot was examined, but apparently couldn't be substantiated, by the Church Committee. Herb Atkin is sure the plot did exist.

"I knew de Mohrenschildt as Philip Harbin," Atkin said when contacted by telephone a few days after the Baron's suicide. "A lot of people in Washington have claimed that Harbin did not exist. But he's the one that ran me from the late fifties onward. I'm certain that de Mohrenschildt was my case officer's real name."

If so, the Harbin alias may have a readily identifiable origin. De Mohrenschildt's fourth wife, Jeanna, was born in Harbin, China.

One summer day in 1976, still in her bathrobe, she sat at a dining room table cluttered with plants and dishes and watched her husband begin to pace the floor. "Of course, the truth of the assassination has not come out," she said. "It will never come out. But we know it was a vast conspiracy."

The Baron turned to face her. "Oswald," he said, "was a harmless lu-

natic."

At our first interview, I had asked de Mohrenschildt what he knew about the recurring reports of Oswald in the presence of Cubans. He had nodded agreement. "Oswald probably did not know himself who they were," he replied. "I myself was in a little bit of danger from those Cubans, but I don't know who they are. Criminal lunatics." When I broached the subject now in the presence of his wife, de Mohrenschildt said something to her in Russian. She then answered for him: "That's a different story. But one must examine the anti-Castro motive of the time. After the Bay of Pigs."

A few months later, de Mohrenschildt was committed by his wife to the psychiatric unit of Parkland Memorial Hospital. There were rumors of a book naming CIA names in connection with Oswald, squirreled away with his wife's attorney. According to journalist Oltmans, upon leaving the hospital de Mohrenschildt told him: "They're going to kill me or put me away forever. You've got to get me out of the country." In March, the Baron took a leave-of-absence from his French professorship at Dallas' virtually all-black Bishop College. He flew with Oltmans to Belgium, wandered away during lunch, and wound up in Florida at his daughter's home. There, a tape machine being used to transcribe a television program is said to have recorded his suicide.

The Gunrunner

Robert Ray McKeown lives with his only daughter in a little wooden house in south Miami. There is a pane of glass missing from the front door so that, from the rocking chair where he sits inscrutably behind his sunglasses, he always knows who's knocking. At 65, the same age George de Mohrenschildt was, Robert McKeown hasn't worked in five years because of lung trouble. Now, he says, he's going to write a book about some people he once knew. Two of them—de Mohrenschildt and ex-Cuban President Carlos Prio Socarras—apparently committed suicides within a week of each other. Two more died some time ago. Their names were Jack Ruby and Lee Harvey Oswald.

In the fall of 1975, McKeown surfaced briefly on a CBS special about the Kennedy case, telling Dan Rather about Oswald and a Latin man coming to see him concerning the purchase of four high-powered automatic rifles in the fall of 1963. CBS didn't ask about McKeown's earlier association with Jack

Ruby, as documented by the Warren Commission. Indeed, according to McKeown, there was plenty he didn't say to CBS.

"One thing is," he says, "I knew that Cuban with Oswald from before. Knew him from Cuba. 'Cept he didn't know I knew. His name was Hernandez."

The intricate chain tying McKeown to the dramatis personae of the Kennedy assassination begins in Cuba in the mid-1950s. A mechanical engineer, McKeown had designed a new coffee-cleaning machine and opened offices in Havana under Fulgencio Batista. But when the dictator demanded his own

rades in arms, shipping them from Houston to Fidel Castro's revolutionary band in Mexico City. After the revolution, according to McKeown, Prio had a promise from Castro to resume the presidency. Besides McKeown, Prio enlisted a young mercenary named Frank Sturgis, other Cuban exiles and occasional aid from teamster-mafia interests. Then, in 1958, the FBI cracked down.

For his part in supplying illegal weapons, McKeown got six months in jail and a \$500 fine. Then, having done his time, he says he began receiving a stream of unusual visitors: Someone from Mexican intelligence, a CIA man who wanted him to check out a certain

er he says he's gonna give me \$25,000 for a letter of introduction to Castro, but he never did come up with the money."

Four-and-a-half years passed before Lee Oswald made a similar visit to McKeown's door. "I was married to a schoolteacher," McKeown remembers. "I'd divorced my wife right after all my trouble. Lived right on the water in a little town called Bay Cliff, right between Houston and Dallas. One Saturday morning—it was either August or the first of September, because my wife was gettin' ready to go back to school—about 11 o'clock, somebody knocked on the door. I'd heard this car stop out there, station wagon, and I seen these two guys get out. Real light color car, kinda pinkish. This guy driving it, the one I knew before, his name was Hernandez. This other guy said, 'My name's Oswald. Just call me Lee.' Then he says, 'I can see I got the right man.' I said, 'Whataya mean?' He says, 'Well, your name is McKeown, isn't it?' So I invited him in with this Spanish man, who was well-dressed, with a tie and everything, and Oswald he was in shirtsleeves. And Oswald commenced telling me, after he sat down, he said, 'Might as well get to the point. I want to know if you'd be interested in furnishing some arms. My contacts have a big opportunity to take over Salvador.'"

Salvador?

"Down in Central America. San Salvador. And I told him, I said, 'Now listen man, lemme tell you something. I'm on five years probation and I don't want no part of no kinda arms.' So Oswald kept talkin', kept talkin', says, 'Well, I know I got the right man and I know you can get me anything I want, can't you?'"

McKeown says he was adamant in his refusal, and the two departed. About a half-hour later, they returned. This time, Oswald offered \$10,000 for four .300 Savage semiautomatic rifles with telescopic sights.

"Oswald said, 'You're the man that run all the guns to Castro and got caught with the cache here in Houston, aren't you?' 'Yeah,' I says, 'but that's all in the past.' I told him I didn't want no part of this kinda business."

Still, says McKeown, Oswald persisted by telephone. "My wife was home alone and she tells me, 'Who in the hell was it calling you wantin' to know if you changed your mind yet?' I says, 'I don't know who it is.' I was tryin' to keep her from findin' out about my past. Then the FBI come to see me, same day as the assassination. Hell, I was scared. I didn't tell 'em nothin' about Oswald. But



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Robert Ray McKeown says that Jack Ruby came to him in 1959 to say that "his people were willing to give me \$15,000 to help get five people outta Cuba. And his people, he said, were the Mafia." Four-and-a-half years later, in the summer of 1963, another visitor to McKeown's door offered \$10,000 for four .300 Savage semiautomatic rifles with telescopic sights. His name was Lee Oswald

\$5,000-a-month cut and McKeown refused, Batista confiscated the business. So McKeown came to Miami—and to the patronage of Dr. Carlos Prio Socarras.

The "Cuban Democracy" tenure of Carlos Prio (1948-1952) has often been described as the most corrupt in the island's history, a time when political gangs (and some American counterparts) ran rampant. In the end, Batista ousted him. But, as McKeown puts it, "Prio got out of Cuba with a helluva lotta money, and he didn't give a damn how he spent it either. I carried \$100,000 in cash in my goddamn inside coat pocket a lotta times."

The two of them became com-

Mexican, two Miami "intelligence officers" who wanted him to work closer with the Cubans on "something to do with cocaine." On January 3, 1959, as Castro marched into Havana, a Houston newspaper headlined: "Gunrunner Hails Castro Victory." A week later, a deputy sheriff dropped by. A man in Dallas was desperate to reach McKeown, "in a case of life and death."

The man was Jack Ruby. "He told me his people were willing to give me \$15,000 to help get five people outta Cuba. He mentioned some Jewish-sounding names, and a fella in Las Vegas. And his people, he said, were the mafia. That's what he called it, the mafia, but he never did mention no names. Lat-

I knew that was the little sonova-bitch. . .”

Before he agreed to go on CBS, Robert McKeown consulted with his old friend, Carlos Prio. After Castro's takeover, Prio had gone back to Cuba. But when Castro did not welcome him back into the echelons of power, Prio returned to exile in 1961 and became a spokesman for anti-Castro forces in Miami. Last April 5, Prio was found in his Miami Beach garage with a .38-caliber bullet in his chest. McKeown, contacted by telephone, had no comment.

He did, however, have something to say about George de Mohrenschildt. “He came to me one time. Long time ago.” Why? “Well, that's something else. Just to ask me a few questions, that's all.” Concerning Cuba? “No, Oswald.” After or before the assassination? “Oh, before. No, after. No, before—goddamn, after. It's been so long.” And what did he want to know? “Well, none of your business. I don't want to get all messed up in this.”

The Exile

For more than a year now, congressional investigators have been looking for a man with dark hair, deep lines across a high forehead, and sunspots below his blue eyes. He would be approaching sixty now. In 1963, he stood about 6-foot-2 and weighed close to 200 pounds, a stocky, soft-spoken man who wore expensive sportswear and liked to roam Latin America as if he owned it.

As late as 1972, the man still served a U.S. intelligence agency, almost certainly the CIA. The Philadelphia police, which did the composite that led to the capture of the Knight slayer, did a similar sketch for a Schweiker committee investigator who now works for the House. If the House can find him, he may contain the answer that McKeown and others hold only a piece of.

He was once the case officer for a violence-prone, CIA-supported Cuban exile faction called Alpha 66. As “Morris Bishop,” he met continually with one of the group's Cuban founders over a 13-year period. They met everywhere from Chile to Las Vegas. They planned everything from Castro's assassination to the disruption of Bolivia's currency. One August afternoon in 1963, they met in the company of Lee Harvey Oswald.

That is the story told by a Cuban I will call “Carlos.” We met twice in Miami hotel lobbies in 1976, where I agreed not to identify him for fear of retaliation against his life. Carlos estimates he met at least 100 times with “Morris Bishop”

in the early 1960s, first in Havana where, says Carlos, “Bishop had a fake passport from Belgium, and was able to enter whenever he pleased. He also spoke French very well.” But in 1960, when Castro's secret police uncovered an early plot to fire a bazooka into the presidential palace, Carlos fled into exile in Miami.

Within weeks of Carlos' coming to the U.S., Bishop contacted him again. He had him organize a cadre of veteran revolutionaries who'd fought alongside Castro before turning against him when he turned to the Soviets. This became Alpha 66. After the Cuban Missile Crisis, says Carlos, Bishop set in motion the commando raids on Russian merchant

given me the address to a building, a bank or insurance company. This was in August 1963. There I met Bishop and Lee Oswald. I didn't know it was Oswald until November, when I saw the pictures on television. But the three of us walked to a cafeteria. Oswald was with us 10 or 15 minutes. He did not say one word. He was very quiet, very strange. Bishop then told Oswald, ‘See you later’ and Oswald left.”

After the assassination, says Carlos, “the FBI contacted me to ask several questions. At first I was worried, but the agent who interviewed me said it was a matter of routine, nothing important. I didn't tell the agent anything, because I thought it would harm the movement.”



WIDE WORLD

The U.S. intelligence agent, case officer for the violence-prone, CIA-supported Cuban exile faction, met continually with ‘Carlos.’ They planned everything from Castro's assassination to the disruption of Bolivia's currency. One August afternoon in 1963, they met in the company of Lee Harvey Oswald

shipping in Cuban ports that would result in President Kennedy's crackdown on anti-Castro activities in 1963.

“Bishop believed that Kennedy and Khrushchev had made a secret pact to do nothing about Cuba. He kept saying Kennedy would have to be forced to make a decision, and the only way was to put him up against the wall. Three ships were attacked in different ports of Cuba. To further make Kennedy reach a point, we held a press conference in Washington to let him know about the commando groups.”

Four months later, Bishop called Carlos to Dallas. “He had previously contacted me for other meetings in Dallas. When I arrived at the airport, he had

Carlos says he never asked Bishop about Oswald, “because Bishop always told me that in this type of work, you just do things, you don't ask.” But in 1964, Bishop tried to induce him to offer Carlos' cousin—then one of Castro's top intelligence aides—a considerable sum to defect and to say that Oswald had contact with Castro agents.

“I asked Bishop if this was true. He said it did not matter, what was important was to get my cousin to make that statement. Bishop never brought up the topic again, and I never asked. I always thought that Bishop was trying to make a cover for himself. I believe Bishop was working with Oswald during the assassination. About six months later, I

brought up the topic about giving money to my cousin. Bishop said there was no need to talk about that plan any longer."

Around this same time, Carlos remembers being called to a meeting in Las Vegas. "We were in a hotel and Bishop left to do something. In his briefcase, I saw a memo with the plans we were doing, movements to contact, the activities of commando groups in Texas. The memo had the initials 'To HH.' There was a millionaire Hunt in Texas, very conservative. I thought, since Bishop was so right-wing himself, maybe he was in contact with the millionaire. Other times I think he works with Hughes. But this is all speculation."

The years passed. Years in Puerto Rico, infiltrating the Communist movement, posing as a sports promoter. Years in Bolivia, a \$30,000 banking specialist with the State Department, working to undermine a leftist government. Carlos' final mission for Morris Bishop was to organize the assassination of Castro, when he came to visit Chile in 1971.

"It was very similar to the assassination of Kennedy, because the person Bishop assigned to kill Castro was going to get planted with papers to make it appear he was a Moscow Castro agent who turned traitor, and then he himself would be killed. But the plan never got off the ground. We had TV cameras with machine guns mounted inside to kill Castro during his speech, but one agent had an appendicitis attack and we had to rush him to the hospital. The other agent said he wouldn't do it alone.

"After this," says Carlos, "a lot of differences began to come up. So many lives being lost, and nowhere."

On July 24, 1973, the Drug Enforcement Administration arrested him on a narcotics-dealing charge that he claims was "a set-up because of my previous activities." Two days later, Bishop paid him a cumulative salary of over \$150,000 for his 13 years of service to the CIA. And Bishop never contacted him again. Carlos served 17 months in the Atlanta Penitentiary. Immediately upon his release, the Church Committee contacted him—and he began to relate his history to them.

Last fall, Carlos was flown to Washington by Senate investigators and taken secretly to a meeting of the CIA's Association of Retired Intelligence Officers. It was hoped he might offer a positive identification of Bishop as David Atlee Phillips, recently retired agency veteran in Latin America and a close match for Carlos' description. But Carlos refused to say. The search for Morris Bishop goes on. ●

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