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BOOK
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NEWS

THE MAY SELECTION

Unmasking
the greatest human forgery in history—
the real life of Lee Harvey Oswald



Oswald with co-workers at factory in Minsk

Legend: The Secret World of

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REPORT BY WILFRID SHEED



In Japan 18-year-old Lee Harvey Oswald (at right, in profile) waits with other Marines for transfer to Philippines.

UNKNOWN in life but a celebrity in death: So much has been written about the late Lee Harvey Oswald that we feel we know him by now—as if sheer volume of print could bring a man back to life. Then to top it off, an actor plays him on TV, and we learn his voice and his style as well, until a complete facsimile Oswald lodges in our memories and not just in our imaginations.

It is Edward Jay Epstein's audacious contention that this Oswald is largely a fabrication, what they call in the spy world a "legend" or made-up personality that goes on working for you long after death. Even down to television appearances.

This type of human forgery is usually associated with a lonely beach in Crete or a back room in Cairo, and it seems just too blatant to stand up to the blaze of American publicity. Yet as Epstein points out, the legend we have swallowed is as improbable as any last-minute alibi. The lonely, unstable Oswald we think we know was in fact a crack Marine Corps radar mechanic with an IQ of 118 and quite a few good friends to boot, whom nobody before Epstein seems to have bothered to interview. At least one of these thought him the most dependable man he knew.

Proceeding to Russia, we find officials eagerly chorusing Oswald's instability and saying that they wanted nothing to do with him. Yet he stayed there for two and one-half years, which is rather long for an American tourist, and left with a beautiful Russian wife, which is rare for anybody—a wife, moreover, who just happened to be the niece of a KGB bigwig. Private snapshots indicate that Lee was living high off the hog the while, in a house a commissar would have whimpered over.

Not bad for a flaky ex-Marine but not

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Lee Harvey Oswald

By Edward Jay Epstein

perhaps impossible. What interests Epstein is what precisely Oswald was doing in the Marines. It seems among other things that he was working around the U-2 spy plane, which flew high above Russian radar and was worth a barrel of undercover men. By chance, the U-2 was finally shot down while Oswald was living in Russia. Apparently they figured out its radar jamming devices and used those to locate it. And Oswald gets a girl and a mansion.

He also writes a diary showing how he gradually became disillusioned with Russia over the years and wants to go home: very touching except that the diary was written in about two days as a slapdash cover story. Oswald was working on his own legend harder than anybody else.

By the time he landed again in the U.S., he clearly had the word "spy" written all over him. But the trouble with spies is that even their own masters don't always know whom they're working for. Vast time and money are annually spent briefing and debriefing these creatures, finding whether their information has been planted, and then replanting them with our own stuff, just as in the spy books — except that in real life, it is much clumsier and funnier.

After Oswald had sidestepped our own bumbling agencies to kill Kennedy, the Russians disgorged the most ludicrous defector this side of Peter Sellers to tell us all about him. This fellow, one Yuri Nosenko, couldn't get anything straight, even the name of his job or the year that he had held it. But he was quite positive that Oswald was unstable and that the Russians hadn't used him; and we bent over backward to believe this, an act of faith unparalleled in world religion.

Thus we and the Russians combined to



A defector in the USSR in 1959. Oswald's photograph was taken for use by Moscow newspapers.



After a May Day marriage in Minsk, Oswald and Marina posed for wedding picture on their balcony.

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produce the Legend, and one of the shrewdest operators of our times was consigned to the ranks of American crackpots. Oswald was simply not worth going to war over. The Warren Commission snatched at Nosenko's unsupported testimony, and the case was closed.

Was Oswald, then, a Russian gun? Epstein doubts it because, outside of anything else, shooting people wasn't his line of work (which may be why our agents weren't watching him that day in Dallas). His most recent job had been in a Dallas photo lab where, by pure chance, he had come in contact with the U.S. overview shots of Cuba: hardly the avocation of a killer.

Cuba itself seems the most likely coconspirator and Epstein cautiously and convincingly traces the Cuban connection. Because he is working with dynamite here, he goes carefully. There is no conjecture without a sturdy row of facts in back of it, and the footnotes are as gripping as the text. A witness actually dies mysteriously in the midst of an interview: a macabre tribute to Epstein's accuracy.

Meanwhile Marina Oswald still spins the Legend for us, in broken English, and Marguerite Oswald sows confusion everywhere, and Oswald's troubled childhood (it wasn't that troubled) and lonely maturity (ditto) have become articles of faith. A more brilliant parable of how news works and how the world works and how in general one goes about hiding a truth as big as an elephant behind a mountain of words is hard to imagine. Dr. Johnson once lamented that he could be clever and original but never both at the same time, and so it goes with assassination books. Until now. This one is a beauty.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Edward Jay Epstein

BY JACK NEWCOMBE

"It is the business of agent runners to turn themselves into legends," Smiley began, rather as if he were delivering a trainee lecture at the Nursery
—*Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* by John le Carré



EDWARD JAY EPSTEIN believes that Oswald most closely resembles the unlikely agent provocateur in Joseph Conrad's *Secret Agent*, published over seventy years ago. But there are elements of the Oswald legend which would fit easily into *Tinker, Tailor*. "I think it is le Carré's best," he says. "It is the kind of book I wanted to do when I began the project." The project, which at times seemed to lead Epstein deep down the paths of spy fiction, had a very practical origin.

In the fall of 1975 *Reader's Digest* editors approached him with the idea of doing a book on the assassination of President Kennedy. Epstein, who had written *Inquest: The Warren Commission and the Establishment of Truth*, did not want to go over old research ground. "I was interested, however, in learning more about Oswald and talking to everyone who knew him. They would be people in their 50s now and would become increasingly hard to find. There were dozens of witnesses who had never been interviewed by the FBI or the Warren Commission—which concentrated on the assassination itself and on proving there was no conspiracy behind it. I wanted to learn about the Marine period in Oswald's life, why he went to Russia and why he returned. The book's purpose was to check the cover story on Oswald presented by the U.S. and the USSR." The farther Epstein got into the research the greater his concern about the overriding question: At what level do you believe in a government's story? "A legend is a lie—and governments have the ability to concoct such legends."

At first Epstein found Soviet officials a little too eager to steer him toward "useful" sources. When he went to the Soviet Embassy and said he would like to visit Russia to research Oswald's life in Minsk he was told there was no need to make the trip, that he could talk to Oswald's former case officer right here in the U.S.! He turned out to be a visible Soviet defector whom Epstein had encountered before and who had been supplying articles to the *Reader's Digest*.

But he received cooperation of a practical sort as he tried to fill in the details of Oswald's duty in the Marines. Over a period of six months he and his researchers (four worked with him during the two-year project) ran up an average monthly phone bill of \$2000 while tracking down members of Oswald's unit. With good help from the Marine Corps they reached 103 enlisted men and officers who might help them determine what, if any, access Oswald had to secret materials on the U-2 spy plane.

Epstein's research in the intelligence community brought him in contact with figures shadowy and enigmatic enough to populate any novel of espionage. One of the first he interviewed at length was the ambiguous, bumbling Yuri Ilyonovich Nosenko, the former KGB officer who claimed when he defected to the CIA that he had access to Oswald's file in Moscow. Epstein's conversations with George de Mohrenschildt, Oswald's "handler" who had been suspected of connections with several espionage rings, were cut short when de Mohrenschildt was found shot to death in an apparent suicide. But it was a Smiley-like figure, James Jesus Angleton, a grower of hybrid orchids and a one-time editor of a poetry magazine before he was chief of counterintelligence for the CIA, who became an essential guide for Epstein through the labyrinth of anti-disinformation. Today, in his New York bachelor apartment, as Epstein works on his next project—a book of *real* fiction—he is surrounded by gift orchids from his nonlegendary source.

Jack Newcombe is Executive Editor of the Book-of-the-Month Club and Editor of the News.