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DALLAS: THE CUBAN CONNECTION

Who was the mysterious "Leopoldo"? Was Lee Harvey Oswald framed, an unwitting agent of plotters hoping to inspire a new Cuban invasion?

By George O'Toole and Paul Hoch

Shortly after news of President Kennedy's assassination was flashed to a stunned nation, a young Cuban woman was admitted to the emergency room of a hospital in a suburb of Dallas. Sylvia Odio had fainted when she heard of the President's death, but it was not grief that caused her to pass out—it was shock. Mrs. Odio had good reason to believe she had been visited by the President's assassins only a few weeks earlier.

Well known to students of the assassination and the Warren Commission's investigation, the Odio incident remains unexplained, one of the many mysterious loose threads never finally tied up by the official investigation. As part of its continuing probe of the unanswered questions of the assassination, *The Saturday Evening Post* has learned of a link between the Odio incident and one of the many attempts on the life of Cuban Premier Fidel Castro carried out by the Central Intelligence Agency and Cuban émigrés in the early 1960's.

In September 1963, on the evening of the 26th or 27th—Sylvia Odio couldn't remember which—three men arrived unannounced at the Odio apartment in Dallas. Two of the visitors seemed Hispanic—Cuban, Mrs. Odio thought, or perhaps Mexican. The third was an "Anglo," identified to her as "Leon Oswald." Eight weeks later, when Mrs. Odio saw pictures of the accused assassin, she was sure it was the same man.

Oswald had little to say during the fifteen-minute visit. The spokesman for the trio was a tall man of about forty years of age who identified himself only as "Leopoldo," which, he explained, was his *nom de guerre* in the anti-Castro movement.

"We are good friends of your father," Leopoldo told Mrs. Odio, and supported this claim with details about the senior Odio who was in Castro's prison on the Isle of Pines.

The two Cubans said they were members of JURE (the Cuban Revolutionary Junta), an anti-Castro group with which Mrs. Odio also was affiliated. They asked her help in translating into English a letter they planned to send to businessmen appealing for funds for the anti-Castro cause. The trio had just arrived from New Orleans, they said; now they were to leave for some other, unspecified destination. As abruptly as they appeared, the three men departed.

The next day Sylvia Odio received a telephone call from the man who called himself Leopoldo. She recalled the conversation for the Warren Commission.

"What do you think of the American?" Leopoldo asked.

"I don't think anything," Mrs. Odio replied.

"He told us we don't have any guts," said Leopoldo, "because President Kennedy should have been assassinated after the Bay of Pigs."

Leopoldo quoted Oswald as saying it would be easy to kill Kennedy. He described Oswald as a former Marine and an expert marksman. But, he added, the Cubans had decided not to have anything to do with Oswald because he was "loco."

Sylvia Odio never heard from any of the three men again. After the assassination she saw television and newspaper pictures of Lee Harvey Oswald and was convinced that he was the Leon Oswald who had called at her home. She feared that Oswald's association with two members of an anti-Castro émigré group might implicate her fellow exiles in the assassination. She did not report the incident to the authorities, but confided in a friend, Mrs. C.L. Connell, a worker in a Catholic welfare group that aided Cuban refugees in Dallas. Apparently Mrs. Connell reported the story to the FBI, because two agents questioned Mrs. Odio about it.

Mrs. Odio's story could not easily be dismissed by the government investigators. To begin with, the possibility that the report was fraudulent and made for the purpose of publicity-seeking did not square with the facts; Mrs. Odio had not taken her story to the press or the authorities—the FBI had to seek her out. Also, Mrs. Odio's sister, Annie, who was present when the three men visited, confirmed that the American resembled Lee Harvey Oswald. And apparently Mrs. Odio's psychiatrist told the FBI that she had mentioned the trio's visit.

The significance of the Odio incident

Just ten days before the Warren Report was published, Liebler wrote a memorandum noting that "Odio may well be right," and that "the Commission will look bad if it turns out she is." But the Commission's chief council, J. Lee Rankin, was quoted as saying, in regard to such objections, "At this stage, we are supposed to be closing doors, not opening them."

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was not lost on the Warren Commission's staff. One member, David Slawson, called Mrs. Odio "the most significant witness linking Oswald to anti-Castro Cubans." In a memorandum he wrote together with William Coleman (another Warren Commission staffer and now Secretary of Transportation), Slawson said:

The evidence here could lead to an anti-Castro involvement in the assassination on some sort of basis as this: Oswald could have become known to the Cubans as being strongly pro-Castro. He made no secret of his sympathies, and so the anti-Castro Cubans must have realized that the law-enforcement authorities were also aware of Oswald's feelings and that therefore, if he got into trouble, the public would also learn of them. . . . Perhaps 'double agents' were even used to persuade Oswald that pro-Castro Cubans would help in the assassination or in the getaway afterward. The motive on this would of course be the expectation that after the President was killed Oswald would be caught or at least his identity ascertained, the law enforcement authorities and the public would then blame the assassination on the Castro government, and the call for its forceful overthrow would be irresistible. A second Bay of Pigs invasion would begin, this time, hopefully, to end successfully.

Slawson added that their scenario was "probably only a wild speculation, but the facts that we already know are certainly sufficient to warrant more investigation."

Yet the final position of the Warren Commission was that Sylvia Odio's visitor

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was not Lee Harvey Oswald, because Oswald could not have been in Dallas at the time of the visit. Although the drafters of the Warren Report admitted that "there is no firm evidence" to support the claim, they concluded that Oswald was riding a Continental Trailways bus from New Orleans to Houston at the time of the Odio incident.

The FBI helped close the door on the Odio incident for the Commission by locating one Loran Eugene Hall, an anti-Castro activist who said that he was one of the three men who visited Mrs. Odio. He identified

his two companions as Lawrence Howard, a Mexican-American, and William Seymour, an Arizonan who looked like Lee Harvey Oswald.

Seymour told the agents he had not been in Dallas in September 1963 and had never met Sylvia Odio.

It appears that the Warren Commission did not even consider the possibility that "Leon Oswald" was deliberately impersonating Lee Harvey Oswald in an incident staged to implicate the real Oswald in the assassination. Such an interpretation should not have seemed farfetched in view of the other evidence the Commission staff had seen. For example, six days after the Odio incident, a man calling himself Lee Oswald visited the Soviet Embassy in Mexico City. The Central Intelligence Agency observed him several times during the next two weeks at both the Soviet and Cuban embassies. The CIA sent the FBI a photograph of a man the Agency identified as this "Lee Oswald." But the CIA's photograph clearly shows that the man was not Lee Harvey Oswald. His true identity, like that of "Leon Oswald," was never learned by the Warren Commission.

Thus, the Warren Commission failed to offer a persuasive argument to support its claim that Lee Harvey Oswald had not been one of the trio that visited Sylvia Odio, nor did it succeed in answering the question of who "Leon Oswald" really was. The Odio incident has remained one of the many mysteries surrounding the assassination of President Kennedy that have persisted during the ensuing dozen years. But *The Saturday Evening Post* has learned of a thread that may connect the incident to one of the several attempted assassinations of Fidel Castro that took place during the early 1960's.

In 1960 a group of accountants in Cuba launched an elaborate operation to embezzle government funds and finance the anti-Castro underground. This was the beginning of Alpha 66, perhaps the most famous of the anti-Castro commando groups.

One of the founders of Alpha 66 was Antonio Veciana. In 1961 Veciana and Reinaldo Gonzales, a bank employee and former leader of the anti-Batista wing of the Bank Workers Union, planned an attempt on the life of Fidel Castro. Veciana's mother rented an apartment a block and a half from the Presidential Palace. The plotters planned to fire a bazooka from the apartment and kill Castro while he was delivering one of his marathon speeches.

Castro's secret police learned of the conspiracy before it could be carried out. Veciana and his mother fled to safety in Miami. Reinaldo Gonzales hid on a farm outside Havana. The farm was owned by a wealthy Cuban businessman who had fought with Castro against the Batista regime, but later turned against the Cuban revolutionary leader. The farm had often been used for anti-Castro activities.

The secret police tracked Gonzales to the farm and arrested him. Under torture he revealed the details of the assassination plan. The owner of the farm and his wife were arrested and sentenced to prison for their part in the affair.

They were Amador Odio-Padron and Sara del Toro, the parents of Sylvia Odio.

Antonio Veciana continued leading paramilitary attacks on the Castro regime from bases in the southeastern United States. He also worked to raise money to finance these operations. In 1962 he claimed to have raised a war chest of \$100,000. Less than a year after the abortive attempt on Castro's life, Veciana had become chief of Alpha 66. His activities continued at least until September 1965 when the FBI reported to the Miami police that Veciana was planning to attack Cuban delegates to the U.N.

Veciana's Alpha 66 activities brought him to Dallas on at least one occasion—April 1964—when he spoke to local members of the commando group. The Dallas Alpha 66 meetings were held at the home of one Jorge Salazar at 3126 Hollendale. It is interesting to note that, just after the assassination of President Kennedy, a Dallas deputy sheriff was told by an informant that Oswald had been associating with some Cubans at "3128 Harlendale."

Like the two Cubans who, with "Leon Oswald," visited Sylvia Odio in September 1963, Antonio Veciana was 1) an anti-Castro activist, 2) engaged in raising funds for the commandos, and 3) acquainted with Sylvia Odio's father. While this falls far short of proving it, a real possibility exists that Veciana was one of the two Cubans who visited Sylvia Odio, or that he at least can shed some light on the Odio incident. There is nothing in the available records of the Warren Commission to indicate that the government investigators ever pursued this line of inquiry or were even aware of this subtle link between the abortive assassination attempt in Havana in 1961 and the successful one in Dallas two years later. ❧